JAN.

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

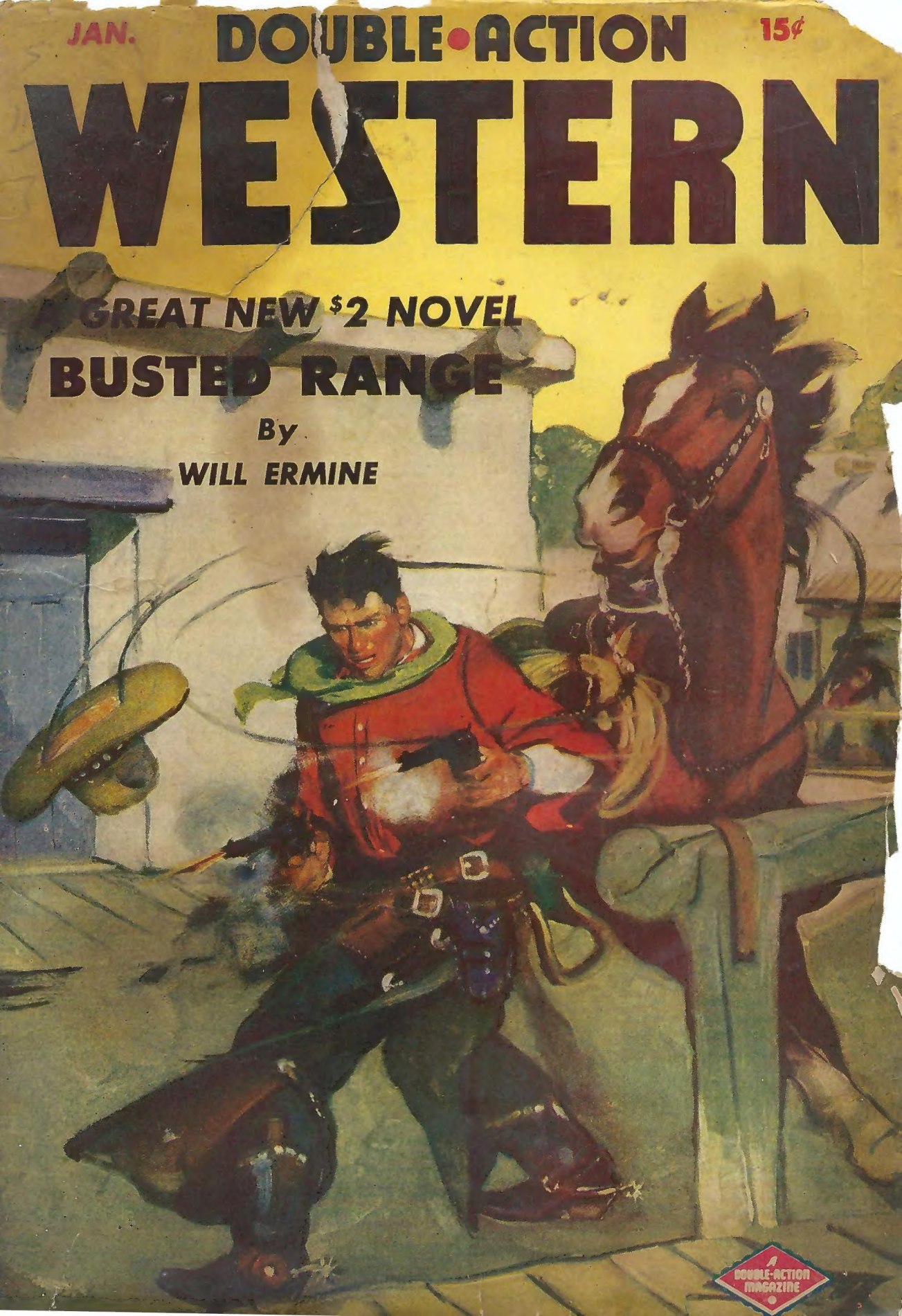
15¢

GREAT NEW $2 NOVEL

BUSTED RANGE

By

WILL ERMINE



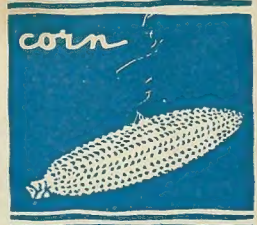
A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

FREE OFFER for USERS of FALSE TEETH

JIM WON'T EAT OUT BECAUSE HE LOSES HIS FALSE TEETH
BOB NEVER HAS PLATE TROUBLE
RUTH SAYS BOB NEVER HAS PLATE TROUBLE
I'LL ASK HIM FOR HIS SECRET
BOB, HOW DO YOU KEEP YOUR PLATE FROM SLIPPING?
CINCH! A SQUEEZE OF CROWN RELINER KEEPS 'EM TIGHT

STAYS TIGHT—OR NO COST!

now EAT—



Here's new amazing mouth comfort without risking a single cent . . . enjoy that feeling of having your own teeth again. Its efficaciousness is attested to by hundreds of users who enthusiastically praise Crown Plate Reliner . . . you, too, will join this happy army if you will just try Crown once. Satisfy your desire for food . . . eat what you want . . . yes, comfortably eat foods you have been deprived of such as steak, corn, apples, etc. Use Crown Plate Reliner and again make eating a pleasure. Remember Crown Reliner tightens false teeth or no cost. Perfect for partials, lowers and uppers.

NOT A POWDER OR PASTE CROWN PLATE RELINER is easy to use.

Don't suffer embarrassment and discomfort caused by loose dental plates. Apply CROWN RELINER. In a jiffy your plate fits like new and stays that way up to 4 months. No old-fashioned heating to burn your mouth. Just squeeze CROWN from tube and put your teeth back in. They'll fit as snugly as ever. Inventor is a recognized authority in dental field. A patent has been applied for CROWN RELINER to protect you from imitators. After you reline your plate with CROWN, take your false teeth out for cleaning without affecting the CROWN RELINER. CROWN RELINER is guaranteed . . . it's harmless. NOT A POWDER OR PASTE! DOES NOT BURN OR IRRITATE. If not satisfied, even after 4 months, return partly used tube for full refund . CROWN is a scientific discovery that you use without fuss or bother. Just squeeze it out of the tube onto the plate and in a jiffy your plate will again feel as tight and comfortable as it did when it was new. Order today and enjoy this new oral comfort right away.

WHAT USERS TELL US — READ!

J. Clements of Algonac writes: "My plates were so bad they rattled when I talked. Now I can eat steaks, corn on the cob." E. W. W. of Virginia writes: "I have found Crown Reliner all you claim for it and more." . . . Many more attest to same excellent results. Reline your plates with CROWN. It's tasteless. Has that natural pink color. Order a tube of CROWN RELINER today . . . enough to last a year.

HERE'S OUR FREE OFFER!

CROWN offers you a two-way protection for your plates. Order CROWN RELINER and receive FREE with your order CROWN DENTAL PLATE CLEANER. The DENTAL PLATE CLEANER is easy to use and restores that new freshness to your plates to help keep your mouth clean and germ-free. CROWN CLEANER eliminates without brushing foods that collect in plate corners and crevices. Helps protect plates because no brushing is necessary and therefore the danger of scratching is avoided. You will enjoy the feeling that your breath is sweet and is not "false-teeth offensive". Order today and get your CROWN CLEANER FREE with the CROWN DENTAL PLATE RELINER . . . remember you don't risk a single cent. You must be 100% satisfied, or your money back.

SEND NO MONEY

Try it for 4 months and then return it for a full refund if not satisfied. Order at once and we will include FREE with your order a tube of CROWN DENTAL PLATE CLEANER. You'll be delighted with both . . . and the CROWN CLEANER will make your mouth feel refreshed. Rush coupon sending name and address. Pay postman one dollar for combination plus postage, or send cash and we pay postage. Act now and enjoy this new happiness.

rush coupon!

Crown Plastic Co., Dept. 3401
4358 W. Philadelphia Ave.
Detroit, Mich.

Just 3 easy steps

CROWN PLATE RELINER is tasteless and odorless.

1. Step No. 1 — CLEAN WELL

2. Step No. 2 — DRY WELL UNDER ELECTRIC BULB.

Step No. 3—SQUEEZE CROWN RELINER FROM TUBE, SPREAD EVENLY, PUT PLATE BACK IN MOUTH.

3.

Order this get this FREE

CROWN PLASTIC CO., DEPT. 3401
4358 W. Philadelphia Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Send your wonderful Crown Dental Plate Reliner and include the FREE Crown Dental Cleaner. I will pay postman one dollar plus postage on arrival. If I am not satisfied after 4 months, I may return partly used tube for full refund.

(☐ I am enclosing one dollar in full payment same guarantee.)

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

YES- I'M CONVINCED THAT I CAN MAKE GOOD MONEY IN RADIO. I'M GOING TO START TRAINING FOR RADIO RIGHT NOW!
NO- NOT ME. I'M NOT GOING TO WASTE MY TIME, SUCCESS IS JUST A MATTER OF LUCK AND I WASN'T BORN LUCKY.

BILL SAID "YES" HE'S MAKING GOOD MONEY IN RADIO NOW
THIS N.R.I. TRAINING IS GREAT. AND THEY SENT REAL RADIO PARTS TO HELP ME LEARN QUICKLY
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER.
I'VE BEEN STUDYING RADIO ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING GOOD MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME
THANKS
OH BILL! I'M SO PROUD OF YOU. YOU'VE GONE AHEAD SO FAST IN RADIO
YES! I'VE GOT A GOOD JOB NOW AND A REAL FUTURE, THANKS TO N.R.I. TRAINING
TOM SAID "NO" HE'S STILL WAITING FOR "LUCK"
BILL'S A SAP TO WASTE HIS TIME STUDYING RADIO AT HOME
SAME OLD GRIND -- SAME SKINNY PAY ENVELOPE -- I'M JUST WHERE I WAS FIVE YEARS AGO
GUESS I'M A FAILURE. LOOKS LIKE I'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE
YOU'LL ALWAYS BE A FAILURE, TOM, UNLESS YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. WISHING AND WAITING WON'T GET YOU ANYWHERE

BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN--More Now Make $50 a Week Than Ever Before--I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 28 Years

Here's your chance to get a good job in a busy field with a bright peacetime future! There is a real shortage today of trained Radio Technicians and Operators. So mail the Coupon for a FREE copy of my 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." It describes many fascinating types of Radio jobs; tells how N.R.I. trains you at home in spare time; how you get practical experience by building real Radio Circuits with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

Big Demand Now for Well-Trained Radio Technicians, Operators

Fixing Radios pays better now than for years. With new Radios out of production, fixing old sets, which were formerly traded in, adds greatly to the normal number of servicing jobs.

Broadcasting stations, Aviation and Police Radio, and other Radio branches are scrambling for Operators and Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, now working on Government orders for Radio equipment, employ trained men. The Government too needs hundreds of competent civilian and enlisted Radio men.

Many Beginners Soon Make $5, $10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time

The moment you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show how to earn EXTRA money fixing Radios. Many make $5, $10 a week extra in spare time while learning. I send you SIX big kits of real Radio parts so you can get practical experience by building real Radio Circuits.

Good Pay Jobs Coming in Television, Electronics

Think of the NEW jobs that Television, Frequency Modulation, Electronics, and other Radio developments will open after the war! You have a real opportunity. I will train you to be ready to cash in when Victory releases these amazing wartime Radio developments for peacetime uses!

But the opportunity the war has given beginners to get started in the fascinating field of Radio may never be repeated. So take the first step at once. Get my FREE 64-page, illustrated book. No obligation—no salesman will call. Just mail Coupon in an envelope or paste it on a penny postcard.—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3NA2, National Radio Institute, Washington—9, D. C.

Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too

Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps Service men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Over 1,700 Service men now enrolled.

FREE BOOK HAS SHOWN HUNDREDS HOW TO MAKE GOOD MONEY

MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3NA2,
NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington-9, D. C.
Mail me FREE, without obligation, your 64-page book "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name .....Age .....

Address .....

City .....State .....

NOTICE By setting the lines of type more closely together, we conserve paper in conformity to government rationing — without any reduction in reading matter presented.

Volume 10 ★ ★ ★ ★ Number 4

DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

★ ★ ★ ★ **Contents for January, 1944** ★ ★ ★ ★

BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

BUSTED RANGE ..... **By Will Ermine** **10**

There was no way to beat the cold-deck decision handed down by the courts in Box Elder County on water rights — at least none that the ranchers in the Wild Horse district could savvy. They'd resort to their guns and go down fighting. But Cress Benton had ideas, radical ideas which would turn his neighbors against him — but they were the only plans which could save the Wild Horse, and thwart the schemes of Bill Rask!

SHORT STORY

Steve Dacey knew of only one way in which he might trace his missing brother Jeff. And that involved looking under the tables of all the nearby saloons!

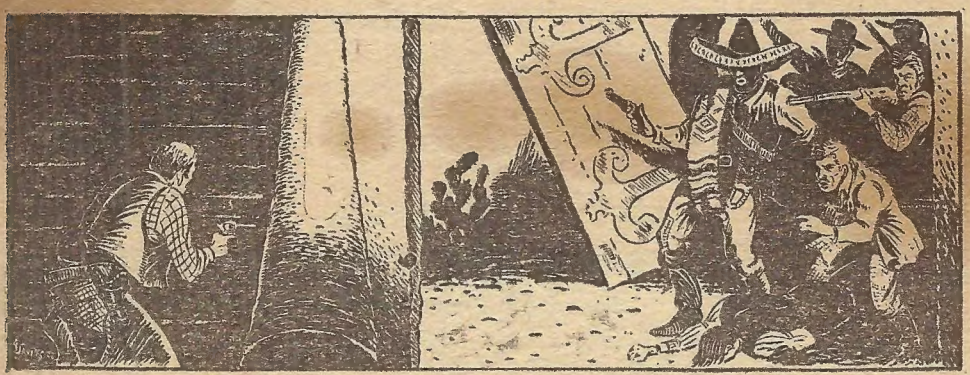
WHITTLING WADDY ..... **By Martin Wolsey** **101**

FACT ARTICLE

PEGLEG OF THE OWLHOOT ..... **By Kenneth P. Wood** **93**

The inside story on a notorious bad man of the old west.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor



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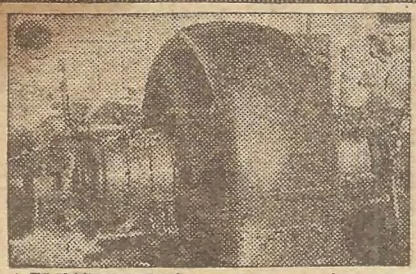
AMAZINGLY EASY WAY TO GET INTO ELECTRICITY

I'll Finance Your Training



★ ELECTRICITY is one of the most important factors in our war effort. Thousands of trained Electricians are needed NOW. And after the war, Electricity will continue to be tremendously important! Why be satisfied with a no-future job when I make it SO EASY to prepare for a good war-time and peace-time job with a REAL FUTURE?

FIRST IN WAR! ELECTRICITY FIRST IN PEACE!

Learn By Doing in 12 Weeks

Get into the fascinating, fast-growing, well-paid field of Electricity—a field that offers you opportunities and a future—in good times or bad times—a field that is a permanent necessity in war or peace. Here is your chance to prepare yourself for a lasting permanent future.

Here at Coyne, in 12 weeks, you can train for your Big Opportunity. "Learn-by-doing" —train on real electrical machinery. Not a correspondence course. Here you learn airplane ignition, wind armatures, learn power plant operation, do house and factory wiring, etc.

SPECIAL OFFER!
RADIO and ELECTRONICS
New Course Now Included! No extra cost!

Coyne training is easy to learn. You don't need previous experience or advanced education. You don't need much money to get my training. I have many plans to help the fellow who needs training but hasn't much money. Mail coupon for all the facts.

H. C. Lewis

GET YOUR TRAINING NOW . . . PAY FOR IT LATER!

LIFETIME JOB SERVICE *Free to Coyne Graduates!*

Coyne Training is EASY, PRACTICAL! You LEARN BY DOING on real, actual machinery and apparatus. Don't let lack of money stop you. You can get training first—then pay for it in easy monthly payments after you graduate. If you need part-time work to help out with living expenses, I'll help you get it.

INSURE YOUR FUTURE! *Send for Book!*

Coyne is 45 years old and has seen War and Peace—times of prosperity and times of national depression. During all these times Coyne has trained men for Good pay jobs. Coyne training is tested and proven. Mail coupon and let me send you the big free Coyne book and my complete story about how I help you get the training you need for a good Electrical job. This does not obligate you. So act at once. Just mail coupon.

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COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina St. Dept. 93-25 Chicago 12, Illinois

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COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL, Dept. 93-25
500 S. Paulina St., Chicago 12, Illinois

Send me your Free Book and tell me about your plans to help me — including Pay-Tuition-after-Graduation offer and Radio-Electronics Training at no extra cost.

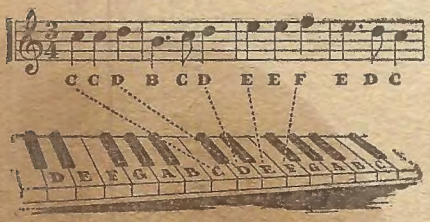
NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

To those who think LEARNING MUSIC is hard . . .

See How Easy It Is!



Strike these notes and you're playing "America". TRY IT — IT'S FUN

Enrolling for 3rd Course

"I learned more from your course than many of my friends who studied under private teachers have for years. The fact that I've already taken 2 courses and am now enrolling for a third should speak for itself."
*F. A. S., Indiana.

Plays from Start

"Your advertisements are true to the letter. I can actually play my favorite instrument even though I'm only at the beginning. How can I ever express my joyful gratitude."
*F. R. O., Illinois.

*Actual names on request. Pictures by Professional Models.

Easy as A-B-C this print and picture way

• Perhaps you think learning music is a tedious grind. It isn't any longer! Long hours of practicing humdrum scales and hard-work exercises are over and done with.

You have no excuses . . no alibis whatsoever for not getting started toward musical good times *now!* For, through a new, easy, pleasant method, you can now learn to play right at home—without a private teacher—for only a few cents a day.

Learn to Play by Playing

The lessons come to you by mail from the famous U. S. School of Music . . complete instructions, large, clear diagrams and all the music you need. You study with a smile. You learn to play by playing real tunes by note. And it's all so easy to understand. First you are *told* how to do a thing. Then a picture *shows* you how. Then *you* do it yourself and *hear* it.

If you're tired of just looking on at parties — if you've envied those who could entertain others — if learning music has always been a never-to-come-true dream — let this time-tested home-study method come to your rescue.

Over 750,000 people have studied music this modern, easy as ABC way. And remember, no matter what instrument you choose, the cost will average only a few cents a day.

Our illustrated Free Booklet fully explains this remarkable course. It shows how you can learn to play quickly, and for a mere fraction of the cost of old, slow methods. So decide which instrument you want to play and mail the coupon today. The fascinating Free Booklet will be sent to you at once together with a "Print and Picture" Sample. U. S. School of Music, 12312 Brunswick Bldg., New York, 10, N. Y.

FREE! PRINT AND PICTURE SAMPLE AND ILLUSTRATED BOOKLET

U. S. School of Music, 12312 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y. Please send me Free Booklet and Print and Picture Sample. I would like to play instrument checked below.

Piano	Piano Accordion	Tenor Banjo	Piccolo
Guitar		Ukulele	Modern Elementary Harmony
Hawaiian Guitar	Plain Accordion	Drums and Traps	Mandolin
Violin	Trumpet, Cornet	Trombone	Practical Finger Control
Saxophone	Reed Organ	Flute	

(Do you have instrument .....)

Name .....

Street .....

City ..... State .....

Note! If you are under 16 yrs. of age, parent must sign coupon.

Save 2c—Stick Coupon on penny postcard

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME ?
ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS DYNAMIC TENSION SYSTEM MAKES MUSCLES GROW

Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!

Charles Atlas

An actual untouched photo of Charles Atlas, holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system inside and outside! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens —my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through **"Dynamic Tension"** you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

Only 15 Minutes a Day

My method — **"Dynamic Tension"** — will turn the trick for you. No theory — every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of **"Dynamic Tension"** almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

FREE BOOK "Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU. For a real thrill, send for this book **today.** AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 4A, 115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 4A
115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

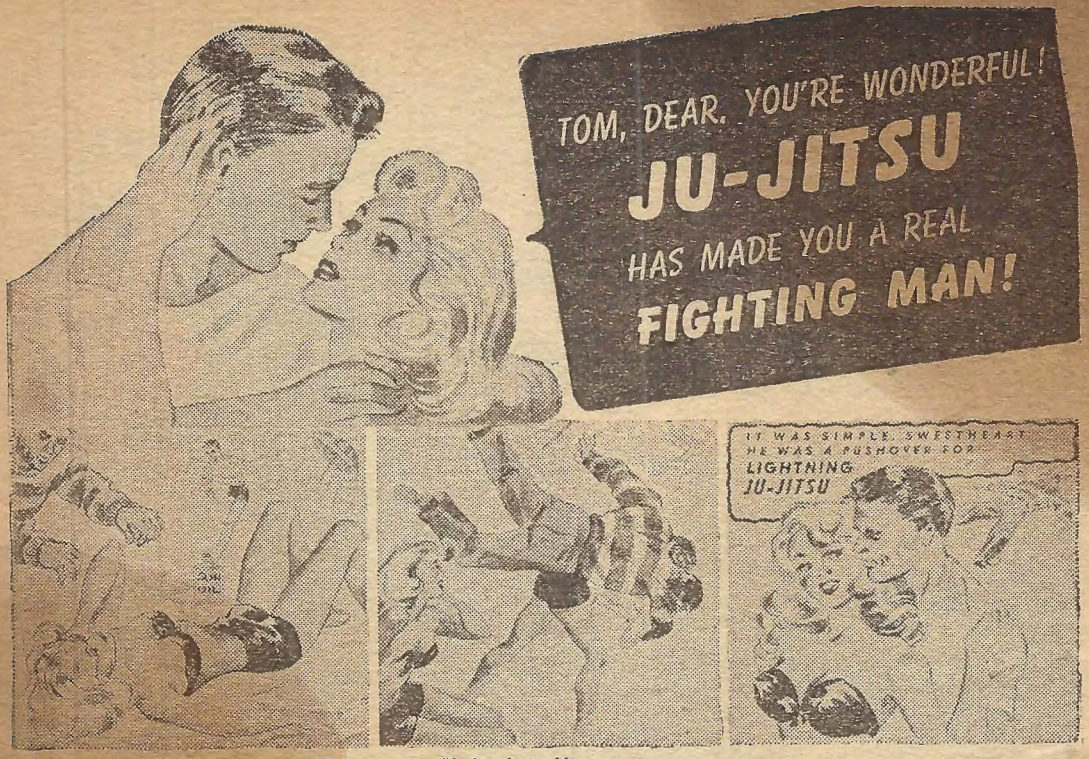
I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly.)

Address .....

City .....

☐ Check here if under 16, for Booklet A.



NOW IS YOUR CHANCE TO BE WHAT YOU HAVE ALWAYS WANTED —

A REAL FIGHTING MAN!

Imagine the feeling of satisfaction in knowing that you're a match for anyone on two feet! . . . in earning the respect of other men and the admiration of women.

Thousands of men have learned that it doesn't take muscles or size — or even boxing skill — to make a winning fighter. They have discovered through LIGHTNING JU-JITSU how to "fix" a "tough guy" looking for trouble. Bullies have learned through sad experience to steer clear of the fellow who knows JU-JITSU.

There are no "secret holds" in LIGHTNING JU-JITSU. In fact, you will be amazed at how simple and quick it is to learn. You will not believe until you actually try it, that merely by following a few easy words of direction you can — almost without effort — send a heavy man flying through space. And more than 100 pictures aid in making it no effort at all to master this "Weapon of Tomorrow".

Criminal Assaults on Women

Every day the newspapers report a mounting toll of criminal attacks against women. Our American girls are turning to LIGHTNING JU-JITSU to help them beat off these loathesome assaults. The chapters on THE ANSWER TO PAWING HANDS . . . MOVIE-MASHER MEDICINE . . . BREAKING AN UNWELCOME EMBRACE . . . etc. . . . are among the most exciting in the book. These safeguards for unprotected women are also illustrated — striking full-length pictures which are enabling many an unescorted girl to walk safely through the streets at night, confident that she can defend herself against the desires of an inflamed criminal.

Just A Sample of What You'll Find In This Amazing Book

How to somersault a man over your shoulder
How to flip a man over your hip
How to break a strangle-hold
How to break a half-nelson
How to apply the "teeth-rattler"
How to break a body grip
The answer to a right hook
How to break a wrist-lock
How to knock-out an enemy with one blow
How to hit where it hurts
How to deal with a drunk
How to disarm a hold-up man

AND MANY OTHERS

FREE ADDED ATTRACTION

As an absolutely FREE gift we are including with each order of LIGHTNING JU-JITSU a copy of POLICE AND G-MEN TRICKS. In it you will learn how our "finest" use JU-JITSU in their task of ridding society of its criminals.

Become the Fighting Man We Say You Can OR YOUR MONEY BACK

Clip the coupon right away. Enclose a dollar bill, or if you prefer, pay the postman 98 cents plus postage when your TNT-loaded copy of LIGHTNING JU-JITSU arrives. Practice the dozens of fighting weapons it teaches you. And then, if at the end of 10 days you don't feel ready to take on all comers, send the book back and we will refund your money instantly!

MAIL COUPON TODAY

NEW POWER PUBLICATIONS, DEPT. A-2001
441 LEXINGTON AVENUE
NEW YORK 17, NEW YORK

Rush LIGHTNING JU-JITSU in plain wrapper together with my free copy of POLICE AND G-MEN TRICKS. If it does not do for me what you claim I may return it within 10 days and my money will be refunded.

☐ *Send C.O.D. I will pay postman 98c (plus 21c postage and C.O.D. charges)*

☐ *I enclose $1.00. Send postage paid. (10 day guarantee holds)*

NAME_____

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Earn
WHILE YOU LEARN WRITING
For All 6 Fields

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Each Volume gives you simple, short-cut formulas for easy-to-write stories that you can produce quickly in spare time and send to editors while learning!

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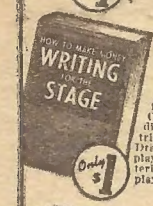
MOVIES

Selling points. 8 essentials. What Hollywood wants. Plotting for stars. Famous scripts analyzed. Smash title. Mistakes to avoid. Love story variations, etc., etc.

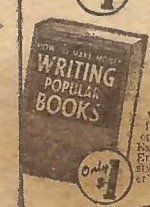


STAGE

What producers want. Pointers for playwriting. Characters. Stage directors. Dramatic tricks. Comedy. Drama. What makes plays successful. Mastering every type of play, etc., etc.

COMICS

Writing comics that sell. Plot elements. How to create characters. Formulas & shortcuts. Getting big returns. Language of Comics. Examples to follow, etc., etc.



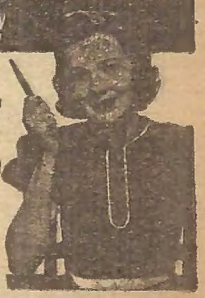
BOOKS

How to choose your story. Plot and characters. Working tips. Making synopsis. Developing your ability. Examples. Secrets of Ernest Hemingway's style. Dorothy Parker's style, etc., etc.

All these 6 books contain quotations of helpful comment and practical advice taken from the works of: Clifton Fadiman, Heywood Broun, Dashiell Hammett, Arch Oboler, H. L. Mencken, John Dos Passos, Thomas Wolfe, Arnold Bennett, William Saroyan, Sherwood Anderson.

Now! MAKE BIG MONEY WRITING
. . . this New, Easy Way!

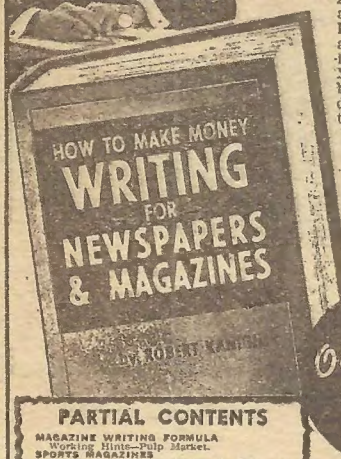
Amazing New Method Gives You
SECRETS OF SUCCESS in WRITING!



There has never been such a tremendous shortage of writers. All the big-paying writing fields are clamoring for thousands of new writers among men and women in all walks of life.

THOUSANDS OF NEW WRITERS WANTED!

Are you one of the thousands who always wanted to write — but never knew just how to begin? Then here, at last, is your opportunity to cash in on today's enormous market! Most of the high-paid writing is not done by "geniuses," but by comparatively unknown people who make hundreds of dollars in their spare time. They have learned the secret of how to do it.



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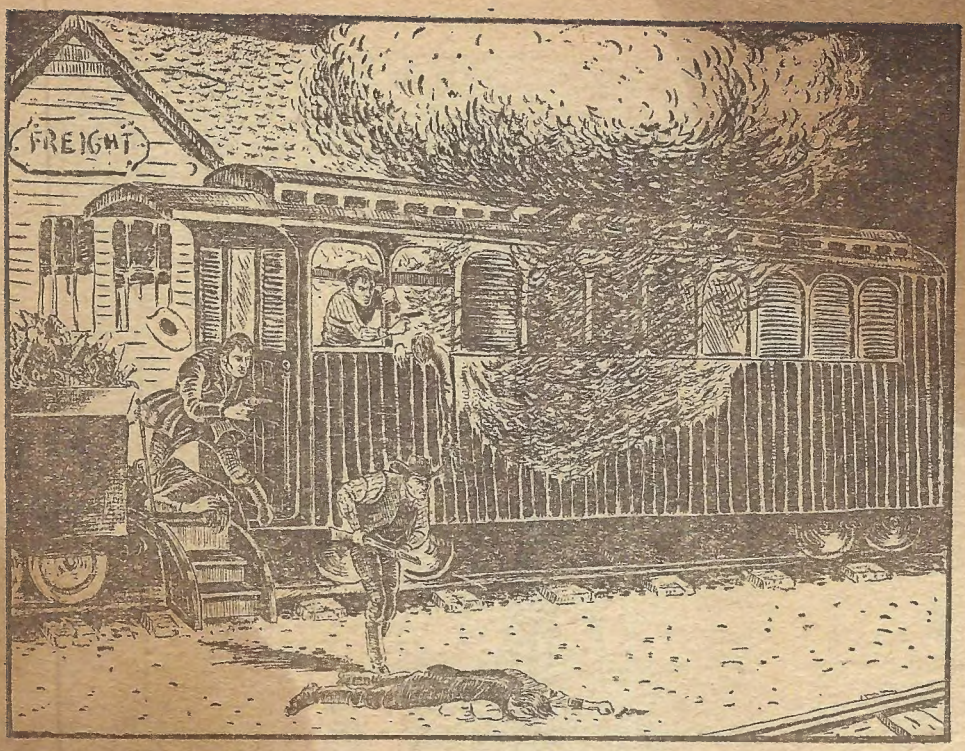

The Fire in the Blazing Car Was Spreading Rapidly . . .

BUSTED ★ ★ ★ ★ RANGE

CHAPTER I

Whole Hog or None

WHEN the Wyoming and Western's westbound local pulled into Medicine Lodge this morning, fully half a hundred men got down from the cars and started up the street toward the courthouse and the business section of the town. It was unprecedented in the brief history of the only railroad that served this part of the state.

It was not any sudden inrush of newcomers, nor did it mark the beginning of any mining boom. These men were not strangers; they were stockmen, cowboys, from Wild Horse and the eastern reaches of the county. If there was an unmistakable grimness and sobriety about them it was because this day was to be, as the Medicine Lodge Ledger had said the previous evening, "the most important day Box Elder County had ever known." Important, it had said, because it was to mark the end of the long years of strife and bloodshed that had arisen out of the conflicting claims and rights to use the precious waters of Medicine River.

Certainly there were few cowmen in sprawling Box Elder County, almost as big as the entire State of Delaware, whose prosperity was not tied up with the future of the river, for every creek and flowing spring poured its waters into it somewhere along its troubled course across the county, all the way from the Big Medicine Range, where it headed,

(Author of "My Gun Is My Law," "Six-Gun Smokeroo," etc.)

A Brand New Booklength Novel

• By WILL ERMINE •

until, after many rebuffs and turnings, it flowed into the Big Horn and was lost.

The Ledger's optimism found no echo among these men from Wild Horse. Under duress, they had submitted their water rights for review by an unbiased judge, appointed by the governor, as had the water users in this western half of the county, the findings of the adjudicator to be binding on all. But there was a reservation in the minds of these Wild Horse men. Medicine Lodge had the bulk of the population, and that meant the votes, to conduct Box Elder's affairs to its own advantage. In the past, they had often found the deck stacked against them, and they were openly suspicious that they were to be given the short end again.

"My tax money helped to put this town together, but I never got a square deal here in my life, and I don't expect to git one this mornin'," tall, grizzled Ki Benton, the leader of the Wild Horse delegation, growled.

Of them all, no one was so bitterly resolved to fight for his rights.

"We're dealin' with a weasel, I'm tellin' you!" he ran on. "It don't take an honest man three months to make up his mind!"

In all of Wyoming no man ran more cattle or owned more range than he. He was nearing seventy, but his step was firm and there was no hint of compromise in his fighting jaw.

Ki Benton was well aware of his might. For forty years, his Flat Iron brand had been growing strong. Never one to do things by halves, he had brought along a dozen of his tried warriors with which to impress Medicine Lodge and his enemies. Shoulder to shoulder with him walked Cash Ryan, his stony-faced foreman, in whom no one had ever been able to detect a trace of nonsense, and young Cress Benton, his only son.

ALLOWING for the difference in their ages, they were as alike as two peas out of the same pod, these Bentons. A stranger would have known at a glance that they were father and son. It wasn't only that they ran to great height and that their shoulders were set in a wide frame; nor did the likeness end in the sculpture of their faces. It was something in the depths of their gray eyes, a certain indomitable light, and the set of their strong, iron-willed mouths that really made them alike.

Cress's glance ran ahead to the courthouse. A crowd had gathered there already.

"This is Bill Rask's town as much as it ever was his father's," he said, speaking to Ryan as well as to old Ki. "If this thing goes against us, don't make the mistake of giving Burrus Parker a dressing down. It won't help our cause a bit."

"Inside the law he is," Cress insisted. "That's where Morgan Rask was smart this time; he arranged this setup so that whatever Parker says has the authority of the state behind it.

"Huh!" old Ki snorted. "That's a lawyer's opinion! I saw to it years ago that my water rights were well established, and so did Greenway and Grinnell and all the rest of us around Wild Horse. We own that water just the same as we own our livestock. Nobody's goin' to take it away from us! I'll go to Washington if I have to! I'm not worried about how this business will end. My only regret is that Morg Rask died thinkin' he'd finally got me into a corner. I wish to God he was alive!

When the law in Box Elder County, bought and paid for by Bill Rask, handed down its infamous decision on water right, the ranchers in the Wild Horse district saw their end in sight. But Cress Benton had other ideas on the subject, and they involved radical steps for a cattleman to take!

When I get through I'd have him laughin' out of the other side of his mouth!"

He was giving voice to an old and bitter enmity. For almost half a century he and the elder Rask had been at each other's throats. Their brands, the Flat Iron and the Triple K, had been the spearheads of every partisan struggle Box Elder County had known. At one time it had not been possible to remain neutral; you lined up with one outfit or the other, or you moved on.

It wasn't only clashing range interests that had arrayed the two men against each other; politics, the control of the county government, legislation to benefit the western half of Box Elder at the expense of the Wild Horse district, had figured in their long quarrel. Morgan Rask had usually had his way politically, but when he had tried to push into the Big Medicine country, grabbing range the way he had done for years around Medicine Lodge, he had been set back on his heels. A stubborn, ruthless man, about whose head one conflict or another had raged eternally, he had done the unexpected even in dying, for he had passed away peacefully in his bed three days after the water hearings had gotten under way.

"It is to be regretted," the Ledger said, "that Morgan Rask did not live to enjoy the fruits of his labors." There were men, however, who had wished him in his grave for years.

A vague but unmistakable air of tension hung heavily over the Lodge this morning. Cress was keenly aware of it. Town boosters claimed a population of over a thousand, a sizable share of whom, it seemed, had laid aside their work that they might miss none of the excitement. In addition, several hundred rangemen, counting the delegation from Wild Horse, had ridden in. Looking down the main street, there didn't seem to be a vacant place left at the hitch-racks. The saloons were crowded, but the stores were not doing any business.

Cress found it significant. He and his father were not without friends here. But for every supporter they could muster, the opposition could marshal twenty. That they were present in such numbers told him plainly enough that Bill Rask anticipated trouble and was prepared to meet it. It left little doubt in his mind that the decision was already known to those on the inside, and that it was so favorable to the stockmen along the lower course of the river that Rask had good reason to believe that violence could not be avoided.

THE Wild Horse men reached the courthouse and started up the steps. Rip Kinnard, the sheriff, stood at the door watching them. His rocky mouth tightened a little as he looked them over. There were depths to Kinnard that no one had ever plumbed. He owed his election to the support of the Rask faction, but he was nobody's toady. Being a far-sighted man, he surmised that what was to take place here this morning marked the beginning, rather than the end, of hostilities. With half an eye he could look ahead and see trouble piling up for himself.

Kinnard jerked a nod at the Wild Horse men and spoke to the elder Benton. "You'll find some chairs roped off down in front, Ki. Just help yourself."

The old man nodded. "Much obliged," he muttered.

They found the courtroom hot and jammed. The windows had been opened, but in every one, two or three men had found seats, shutting out whatever little breeze there was. Alva Linscott, Ki's lawyer, came up the aisle to greet them. He was putting up a bold front, but Cress and his father knew him too well to be fooled by it.

"Have you heard anythin'?" Ki demanded gruffly.

"No, I haven't. But Bill Rask was in town last evening acting a little cockier than usual. I don't know whether it's the tip-off or not. But you know he isn't as smart as his father was. That old highbinder wouldn't have batted an eyebrow if

he'd known that the U. S. mint was about to drop into his lap. That isn't Bill's way; whenever he knows he's going to take a trick, he has to spread himself."

"Whatever it is, it better not be too raw," Ki declared grimly. "All the way down the river from the Steppin' Stone peaks to the Injun Crossin' we're thinkin' as one man about this. We'll give an inch or two, Linscott. But no more!"

Years of legal skirmishing in Ki Benton's behalf had long since acquainted Alva Linscott with the fact that whoever stepped on the old man's toes found he had tangled with an enraged grizzly. Though he knew the advice would be wasted, he said:

"No matter how Parker rules, you want to hold yourself in, Ki. No law goes on the books that can't be repealed or amended. The place to do something about that is not here in the Lodge."

Cress saw an explosion tremble on his father's lips. But the old man restrained himself and sat down with a snort of contempt, his thin face working angrily.

"How much longer we got to wait?" Ki demanded crossly.

Linscott glanced at his watch. "About ten minutes."

There were empty chairs across the courtroom. Cress knew they had been reserved for Rask's adherents. A few minutes later the crowd stiffened expectantly and heads were turned toward the door. Rask strode in, followed by a dozen or more cowmen who accepted his leadership. He was a big man, beginning to run to fat, though he had just turned thirty. His manner was arrogant, and there was a flush of excitement on his reckless, rather handsome face. His glance and Cress' crossed without any sign of recognition by either.

A buzz of conversation ran over the room. A clerk rapped for order then, and Judge Parker ascended the bench. Without any preamble, he began to read a prepared statement, glancing up over his glasses every time he turned a page. This was only a review of the physical geography of Medicine River, of its importance to the livestock industry of the state, of the conflicting claims to its flow, arising out of the construction of privately owned dams, together with the history of the act passed by the legislature designed to correct certain injustices, and the authority vested in himself as referee. This was all old stuff; no one was interested. Not a man in the room but knew these things as well as he. What they wanted was his ruling.

WHEN it came it created a sensation. It established three water districts: District One to comprise that section of the river lying between the headwaters in the Stepping Stone Peaks and Indian (Sioux) Crossing; District Two to extend from there to Medicine Lodge; District Three to cover the remaining section from the county seat westward to the confluence of the Medicine and the Big Horn. In District One, stockmen were to use the full amount of water to which they were legally entitled in the period ending on June 15th, at which time all headgates were to be taken down. In District Two, the same course was to be followed, with all dams and obstructions impeding the natural flow of the river to be opened or removed on July 15th. On that date, ranchers in District Three were to begin using their allotment of water.

It was such a one-sided victory for the Rask contingent that the Wild Horse men sat stunned for a moment. In the past, especially in dry years, there had often been very little water flowing down the lower Medicine in mid-August. Under this new arrangement those stockmen were not only being guaranteed every legal inch they claimed, but they were to get the water when they needed it most. District One, and that was the Wild Horse range, was to get its water, too, but at a time of the year when it would serve no purpose at all.

Among those who had accom-

panied the Bentons to Medicine Lodge were some substantial citizens; men like Tom Greenway and Reb Grinnell, big ranchers in their own right. They had cool heads, but when the truth sank into them and they realized what they faced, they joined with a will in the growl of violent protest that rolled up from the Wild Horse men. Ki Benton had popped to his feet. Steel chains could not have held him in his chair.

"That's wholesale robbery!" he cried, banging the railing with his clenched fist. "You might as well rule us off the river altogether as to jam any such deal as this down our throats!" Burrus Parker banged his gavel in vain; Ki was not to be stopped.

"What are we going to do with water in May and June?" he demanded, as menacing as a gaunt old eagle as he stood there. "The winter run-off ain't hardly over by then! It's in August we need the river, same as anyone else!"

The judge was on his feet, shaking his gavel at Ki by now. "Another outburst like this and I'll cite for contempt!" he threatened shrilly.

"Cite, and be damned to you!" the old man flung back. "There's no authority in you or in this state to take away from me what's legally mine! I'm no water hog, Parker, but I ain't knucklin' under to any such sell-out as this! If the interests in this county that pushed this act through the legislature think they can make me pull down the headgates of my dams on the 15th of June, let' em try it!"

The Wild Horse men rallied behind him with a roar of defiance. Tom Greenway hauled himself to his feet. "That says it for all of us," he boomed. "We'd have taken a fair compromise and said no more about it, but we won't stand for this!"

The courtroom was in an uproar. Across the way Bill Rask and his followers exchanged an uneasy but knowing glance. Old Ki had turned to the door and was striding down the aisle. Cress caught up with him. He expected the judge to order the sheriff to take the old man into custody.

It needed only a word from the bench to touch off an explosion. Parker seemed to realize it, for he checked himself in the very act of calling on Kinnard to arrest Ki.

The others had swung in behind them, leaving only Linscott, as their attorney, to represent them. At the door, Kinnard was waiting. He caught Cress' eye as the Wild Horse contingent surged past him and called him aside.

"You'll be here till the evening train pulls out for the east," he said soberly as they walked outside to the steps. "Keep an eye on the old man, Cress. Something might happen to him," he added cryptically.

It pulled Cress up sharply. He studied the sheriff's inscrutable eyes for a moment.

"Is that a warning, Rip?"

Kinnard shrugged. "It's whatever you want to make of it. I know Ki's mad enough to be careless about what he walks into. . . Somebody may be figuring on that."

Cress' face whipped tight. He understood the other perfectly. Rip couldn't have made it plainer.

"So they've got it all arranged," he said, his tone hard and flat. "For all his swaggering Rask evidently knows he's got a long, tough trail ahead of him or he wouldn't be planning anything like that." He shook his head grimly. "Rubbing out my father wouldn't be any short-cut. Bill ought to know that."

"I didn't say anything about Bill Rask," Kinnard reminded him pointedly.

Cress nodded woodenly. "That's right, Rip, you didn't. But thanks just the same. I'll try to return this favor some day."

He caught up with his father. The sheriff's glance travelled along with him, and a gleam of grudging admiration for the tall, long-legged man flowed into Kinnard's unreadable eyes.

"He's young," he thought, "but there's no noise or loose talk in him."

It was not Rip's way to waste his

time in idle speculation. The events to come were already casting their shadow before them, however, and he did not find the future difficult to read. Old Morgan was in his grave already; Ki Benton was still going strong. It didn't fool him. He knew that in the end it would be Cress who would carry the fight to Bill Rask.

"The odds will be all against him," he mused, "but if I could choose sides, he'd be my man."

CHAPTER II

Wings of Death

CRESS had no intention of telling his father about what had passed between Kinnard and himself. When Ki said, "What did he have on his mind?" Cress was ready for it.

"Just a little advice about keeping the peace."

"Rob you blind, then they tell you to roll over and play dead, eh?" the old man rapped. "Kinnard better not tell me how to handle myself in this town! It still ain't ag'in the law for a man to call a spade a spade!"

"We better keep our fighting for the place where it will do some good," Cress suggested. "They're not starting to tear down our headgates yet."

Ki snorted furiously. "No, and they never will! The man who puts foot on my range for that purpose will run into gunfire, no matter how many tin badges he's wearin'!"

Cash Ryan nodded his complete accord with this. "We got a little worse than we expected, but they haven't got our water yet."

When they reached the Elkhorn Hotel they had an hour to wait before the dining room opened. Cress got Ryan aside before the latter gave any instructions to the Flat Iron riders. It didn't take him long to acquaint Cash with Kinnard's warning. The foreman's eyes narrowed to slits in his hard-bitten face.

"The dirty skunks," he ripped out tensely. "That sounds like Bill Rask! I'll see that Buck and the boys are around handy, no matter what comes. It won't be necessary to tell them why."

"Don't tell anyone," said Cress. "If the old man gets wind of this he'll go gunning for someone."

There was a short order restaurant and several saloons across the street from the Elkhorn. Cress realized that to hold the crew too close to the hotel would be certain to arouse his father's suspicions.

"Let them drift over there, Cash," he suggested. "The two of us will stick close to the old man. We'll be out on the porch most of the time."

The hotel porch was covered and about as comfortable a spot as could be found in town. It was also an excellent point from which to observe what went on. Greenway, Reb Grinnell and the other owners gathered around old Ki. They didn't put it into words, but they knew if Parker's decision stood up that Flat Iron would lose less than most of them, for it could turn to the springs and mountain creeks that dotted its high range. Grinnell, for one, had no source of water other than the river.

"This could wind things up for me, Ki," he declared gloomily. "You know I haven't got any good winter range. I've always had to feed most of my stuff. I can't do it with one cuttin' of alfalfa, and that's all I'll get if I don't have water through July."

"That goes for most of us," another spoke up. "Our only chance is to stick together. It means war, Ki, but it's that or nothin'."

"You don't have to feel me out," the old man snapped, shrewdly surmissing what was behind their talk. "I gave you my word long ago that I'd stick with you tc the finish. My word's always been enough. Maybe I could git by without any water from the river. But I ain't interested in finding out. What belongs to me, I keep! I've never sold an acre of rangeland nor vented a brand in my life. When I put my mark on anythin', I put it there to stay. That goes for my son, too. If anythin'

happens to me, he'll keep my pledge to you." He glanced toward the courthouse. "Wal!" he snorted disgustedly. "Bill Rask's little sideshow is over!"

THE crowd was streaming out of the building. In a few minutes Alva Linscott came out and made directly for the hotel. Ryan got up and offered him his chair at Ki's side. Linscott mopped his face.

"Wal?" Ki growled.

The lawyer shook his head hopelessly.

"It wasn't any use," he said. "I tried to take some exceptions to his ruling, but he refused to sustain a single objection. He's appointed three water-masters at four hundred a year. He had the crust to appoint you in District One."

"Why, damn his ornery little hide, I'll see him in hell before I'll let him hamstring me with any of his appointments!" the old man roared. "Settin' me up to rob myself, is he? Wait till I see him! I'll tell him!"

"Your refusal to serve won't surprise him any," said Linscott. "That's part of the game, Ki; his way of being able to say to the rest of this state that he tried to be fair to you and you wouldn't cooperate."

Ryan nudged Cress as Linscott talked to Ki and the others, and he glanced up to see Bill Rask crossing the street in the direction of the hotel. Brad Mulhall, the superintendent of the Triple K ranches, was with him.

A quick understanding glance ran between Cress and Ryan. Their careless attitudes gave no hint of the alertness that gripped them as they waited. Rask owned the most palatial house in town, but since his father's death he had closed it and made his headquarters at the Elkhorn whenever he was in the Lodge.

Cress was vaguely aware that conversation on the hotel porch had ceased as the two men came up the steps. Rask had a self-satisfied smirk on his lips. He kept his eyes ahead of him, however. In the few seconds it took him to cross the porch the air became suddenly ominously still. Ki Benton snorted contemptuously.

"A good dose of rat poison spread around this hotel wouldn't hurt it none," he observed thinly.

Rask's shoulders lifted with rage and the cords in his heavy neck began to swell. He understood that the remark was made for his ears, and that the reference was to himself.

Cress's hand edged toward his gun. Bill was armed, and as he hesitated at the door, Cress expected him to whip around with his gun in his fist.

Rask was tempted. But he was no fool, and he had only to remind himself that he had something better than this up his sleeve to want none of it. He pushed in with Mulhall and the screen door banged sharply behind them. Ki Benton laughed scornfully.

"Streak of yellow in him just as there was in his old man," he growled.

"Maybe," Linscott said reprovingly. "It's a little soon for laughing, however. If these Rasks couldn't outfight a man, they were often smooth enough to outsmart him. I'm going home to dinner, but I'll be back in my office by one-thirty. I'll want you to drop up and sign some papers. The best I can promise you, Ki, is to try to slow this thing up so it will go over to next year. I can't do anything here; I'll have to go down to Cheyenne and see if I can't get an injunction."

Linscott had been gone a few minutes when Burrus Parker stepped on the porch. Ki went after him in a hurry.

"I understand you've appointed me water-master, Parker," he whipped out fiercely.

"Yes; I thought you would appreciate the responsibility—"

"Wal, you can put your job on your eye! You rule me off the river and then fix it so I'm to git four hundred dollars for helpin' to make this dirty deal stand up! What are you goin' to git out of it—the nomination for U. S. senator?"

PARKER flushed and stammered. His political ambitions were well known.

"My services are not for sale, Benton!" he exclaimed, shaking with indignation. "I made no bargain with anyone! I've tried to be patient and lenient with you, but another foul aspersion on my character will bring some action from me, I promise you!"

"I doubt it," Ki flung back. "Your work here is finished, and you'll go back to Laramie and be glad to git away. I know there was a deal. I've got some evidence in my possession to prove it. Any time you feel like hailing me into court, you go ahead. What I'll have to say will burn your ears off!"

This was just a magnificent bluff, but old Ki knew how to make the most of it, and it was too near the truth for Burrus Parker to challenge it.

"I've been threatened before," he got out, badly ruffled. "You're just a lawless, whisky-drinking old man, Benton! But you'll be forced into line!"

He sailed into the hotel and went up to his rooms. There was not a man on the porch but believed that Ki had called the turn. Even Cress was ready to admit it. But he asked himself where this baiting, first of Bill Rask and now of Judge Parker, was to lead. He realized that it could be the arranged prelude to a smoky showdown. He got a chance to speak to Cash about it as they filed into the dining room.

"The old man sounded off just as they had every reason to figure he would," he said. "If anything comes of this, they can always prove that he was the one who was looking for trouble."

"It looked queer to me for Rask to wade through us with only Mulhall with him," Ryan observed. "I felt the same way when Parker showed up alone. But maybe we're just gettin' jumpy over nothin'. If any attempt is made to cut the old man down, it won't be where there's so many of us around."

Dinner passed off without anything happening. Rask and Mulhall came in and sat down at a table across the room, but not before Cress noticed that neither was armed. For them to have laid aside their guns only redoubled his suspicions.

"No matter what happens, they're going to be in the clear," he thought.

He could no longer doubt the accuracy of Kinnard's warning. He was just as sure by now that Bill Rask was not the man to watch; when trouble came, it would not come from his direction.

Ki smoked an after-dinner cigar on the porch. "I'll drop over to Linscott's office," he announced then. Cress and Ryan got up to accompany him. "No need for you boys to tag along," he insisted.

"We'll go, just the same," said Cress. "I don't propose to have you take on the whole town just because you got away with spitting in Parker's eye and putting the crawl on Bill Rask."

The old man gave in grudgingly, and the three of them walked up the street together.

Linscott's office was located over the Medicine Lodge Mercantile Company's store. Other professional men had their offices there. The stairway to the second floor led up from a side entrance to the building. The street door stood open. Cress pushed past his father and glanced above. The setup was made to order for what he feared. Anyone so inclined could easily pop out of one of the offices and pick off a man climbing the stairs.

"What's your hurry?" old Ki rapped.

Cress didn't bother to answer. He was halfway up the stairs already. When he reached the second floor he swung in close to the wall and waited. A door opened down the hall. He whipped around and drew in one motion, and then was covered with confusion, for it was only Mrs. Langer, one of Doc Edmund's patients.

ON THE way down she stopped to speak with his father. Ryan

stood aside, his vigilance unrelaxed. But nothing happened.

Linscott had not returned from home. He came in shortly. By the time the papers had been signed, it was after three o'clock. Ryan had several things he needed for the ranch that couldn't be had in Wild Horse.

"Hardy offered to send for them," he said. "But that'll take time."

"We'll wait," Ki grumbled. "What we can't buy in Wild Horse, we'll do without. I've spent my last dollar in this town!"

When they got back to the hotel, the sun had gone around to the porch and they moved back from the railing, hunting the shade.

The town had quieted down, and Cress began to breathe a little easier. Ki had dozed off in his chair.

"Somethin' went wrong with their plans," Ryan murmured. "I reckon it was over there on the stairs they planned to hand it to him."

Cress nodded. He glanced at his watch. "An hour and ten minutes to train time," he said.

Some of the Wild Horse men, who had been down the street, began to put in an appearance. Across the way Cress saw part of the Flat Iron crew playing pool. Three or four others were lined up at the bar. Every few seconds they glanced across at the hotel, proof enough that they were not doing much drinking.

At the corner, Kinnard emerged from the hardware store with Jim Brown, the proprietor, and stood there talking, his cold gaze sweeping the street. Del Springer, the marshal, who was responsible for the peace of the town, passed them. There was no friendship between him and Kinnard, and they did not speak.

In the saloon two doors from where the Flat Iron men were playing pool, a quarrel broke out. Angry voices floated across to the hotel porch. It sounded like the usual saloon argument.

Two men came out several minutes later. One of them was Buck Marr, a Triple K rider; the other, a truculent, foul-spoken little man by the name of Bush Spangler, who was generally considered as worthless as the small piece of range he owned out on the flat-lands west of the Lodge.

It was these two who had been quarrelling, and they were still standing up to each other with blood in their eye.

"Don't crowd me too far, Spangler!" lantern-jawed Buck Marr warned. "You wouldn't dare to open your mouth to me if you didn't have a skin full of liquor!"

Spangler ripped out a vile oath and snapped up his gun. Buck Marr was armed, but instead of drawing, he tried to slap the long-barrelled Colt out of Spangler's hand. It was strange behavior for a man reputed to be as handy with a six-gun as Buck Marr.

Everyone was watching now. The Flat Iron men had thrown aside their pool cues and rushed to the sidewalk. Rip Kinnard was running up from the corner. Del Singer, the town marshal, was not in sight. Of those who were, only old Ki, asleep in his chair, was unaware of what was happening.

"The fool!" Cash Ryan jerked out. "Spangler will kill him!"

He was only stating what he believed to be a fact, not expressing any sympathy for Buck Marr. Cress felt the same way about it. Who had the right of this quarrel, and how it ended, did not concern him.

Spangler had dropped a step beyond Marr's reach. It gave him all the time he needed to carry out his part of this carefully rehearsed "fight." At the right second the Triple K puncher leaped aside. It put the hotel porch directly in the line of fire. With his gun at his hip, Spangler squeezed the trigger. If Buck Marr was untouched by that rocketing blast it wasn't because Bush Spangler's shooting was bad. Quite the reverse was true; the real target sat on the hotel porch, and the slug that went speeding across the street found its mark.

It came so quickly that the dozen men caught there didn't have a chance to move. For a moment neith-

er Cress nor Ryan was aware of what happened. They saw Kinnard reach Spangler and drop him with a sharp chop on the head with the barrel of his gun.

ALL that was washed out of their minds an instant later as old Ki slumped over in his chair. Cress caught him as he started to slip to the floor, his eyes torn wide as he beheld the widening red stain spreading over his father's shirt. His startled, anguished cry froze in his throat.

"Good God!" he groaned. "They got him, Cash! We sat here and let them kill him before our eyes!"

Buck Marr's strange conduct was completely understandable to him now, even as he realized that Marr and Spangler were only tools, doing another man's bidding.

The Wild Horse men were stunned for a second. They leaped to their feet then, clutching their guns, crying their wrath and thirst for vengeance.

The iron will that was in Cress Benton asserted itself. Very little sentiment or emotion had ever passed between his father and himself. It was no gauge of their true feeling for each other. But Cress knew this was not the time to consider his loss.

"You stick with him, Cash!" he ordered. "A doctor couldn't help him; he's gone! You others—stand where you are and let me handle this!"

Leaping over the railing, he ran across the street. Del Singer had made a belated appearance. He snapped a handcuff on Marr's wrist. Hauling Spangler to his feet, he shackled the pair together. Out of nowhere, it seemed, Triple K men had appeared in number. The Flat Iron crew stood bunched together, a hard, grim slant to their mouths. Rip Kinnard had not said a word. He just stood there silent and formidable, his unreadable eyes missing nothing.

"Why in hell are you lockin' me up, Dell?" Marr was protesting loudly, still carrying through with his bluff. "I wasn't disturbin' the peace; I didn't even have my gun out of the leather! All I done was to tell Spangler to lay off of me! I knew he was drunk, but a man don't have to back away from that all afternoon. It wasn't my fault that shot went wild and nailed old Benton!"

"Shut up!" the marshal barked. "It was an accident, I allow, but I'm takin' the two of you in."

Cress grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around.

"Don't let me hear you call this an accident, Springer!" he said tensely. "You know better!"

"Why, I don't know anythin' of the sort—" the marshal started to bluster. Something in the depths of Cress' gray eyes stopped him. He flashed an appealing glance at the Triple K men in the crowd.

"You slimy little toad, you were in on this!" Cress followed up accusingly. "You knew what was coming up! Arresting these men is just a trick to protect them. Give them back their guns and take off the handcuffs if you dare."

"Don't you try to tell me my duty!" Springer retorted, trying to reassert his authority. "I want this street cleared now! Break it up, men!"

Nobody moved. Kinnard tapped the marshal on the arm. "You better go along with your prisoners," he advised quietly. "I'll handle things here."

SPRINGER was glad enough to seize this way out. The sheriff ordered the crowd to disperse. "You Flat Iron men walk over to the hotel; the rest of you go on about your business."

He waited for them to start moving away. One or two began it, and the others followed, though they could not have said why they chose to obey. Kinnard nodded and walked across the street with Cress.

"I was all set for it, Rip, but they caught me flat-footed," the latter muttered. "You saw what happened. It was murder."

"If it was—you'll never be able to prove it."

"No, and I don't propose to waste my time trying. But I'll square it with interest."

The crowd on the porch let them through. Bill Rash and Mulhall stood near the door. Cress pulled away from Kinnard and faced the big man. Some of Rask's self-assurance seemed to drain out of him.

"You've had things your way today, Rask," Cress said, his voice thin with his hatred of the man. "But I'll pull you down before I'm through. Grinding the life out of you won't satisfy me; I'll make it hurt worse than that."

Bill's lips curled away from his teeth. "That's a game two can play, Benton."

Cress shook his head. "Not for a minute! I'm the Flat Iron now. You'll find you've got something more than a gun-fight on your hands. You know how to bushwhack a man and push men around; but that's as far as your brains go. You've got a lesson coming to you, and you're going to get it!"

CHAPTER III

Gunsmoke Deadline

THE big Flat Iron house seemed silent and empty without Ki Benton's aggressive, cantankerous spirit to make things tick. Cress felt it keenly, missing most of all the very prodding that at times had been almost unbearable.

He had no complaint to make about the way the work was going; the branding had been completed around the Stepping Stone peaks and the wagon had begun moving down the river. Ryan was up there with most of the crew, and the word he sent down was that the stuff had wintered well and that the calf crop was better than usual.

Cress realized that he had fallen heir to Cash's loyalty to old Ki. As for the crew, he had always been one of them, never taking an easy trail because he was the old man's son. By and large, he believed they would follow him no matter in what direction he moved. In the three weeks that had passed since his father had been laid away it had become increasingly clear to him that an era had died with the old man; that the old days and old ways were gone forever. Ki had always denied it; but Wyoming had been growing up.

What the immediate future was to bring, no one could say. But Cress had convinced himself that armed rebellion, like the Johnson County War, would not save the day if Linscott's efforts down in Cheyenne to have Burrus Parker's ruling set aside ended in failure.

Linscott had won a temporary stay and was now being heard by the state supreme court, endeavoring to have the whole matter reversed. Cress had been hearing from him every day or two. The increasing pessimism of his letters was indication enough of what he thought the outcome would be.

Cress was in the ranch office this morning, rereading Linscott's last communication, received two days previous, when Curly Gibson, the ranch handyman, limped across the yard, a saddled horse in tow. He left the animal at the rack and walked into the office. He was an old Flat Iron retainer, his riding days over, who had been with the brand for half a lifetime.

"Thar's yore big gray hoss," he said. "Comin' up from the corral I noticed his right fore shoe was loose. Stopped and had Mac reset it. Jest as well that yuh was held up a few minutes. Someone comin' over the rise to the south. Looks like it might be Greenway."

Cress walked to the door with a pair of glasses and put them on the visitor.

"It's Tom Greenway," he murmured. "Another meeting tonight, I suppose."

"Like as not," old Curly grumbled. "Too many meetin's and too little bein' done, if yuh ask me. Thar wouldn't have bin so many meetin's if yore pa was here; he allus knew what he wanted to do without a lot

of palaverin'. Come hell or high water, he was ready for it."

Cress smiled to himself, realizing that here was one of his father's disciples who had bred true and that nothing could change him.

"You were weaned on gunsmoke, Curly, and you don't understand anything else. Tom Greenway is a good leader."

"Mebbe. But this was a job for a Benton. I don't know why yuh refused to take it."

Cress could have told him. He passed it off lightly, however, refusing to be drawn out.

GREENWAY rode into the yard ten minutes later. Benton went out to greet him.

"Will you get down, Tom?" he queried.

"No, just stoppin' a minute. I have to get word to the others. We're gettin' together at my place tonight. Can we count on you?"

"Yes, I'll stop in on my way back from town. There ought to be some word from Linscott. Anything particular come up?"

"Well, they finally got a watermaster for this district," Greenway declared contemptuously. "When they found they couldn't get a man in this district to take the job, they went all the way back to the Lodge for one. Pete Nasby! A fine piece of riff-raff! God help him if he shows his long nose around here! He'll be sent a kitin', dressed up in tar and feathers!"

Cress nodded. "He'll be lucky to get off that easy. But he'll be back, and he won't come alone the second time. Kinnard will be with him."

Greenway's mouth closed with a snap. "If Rip Kinnard asks for cards in this game, he'll have to play 'em!"

His meaning was plain enough.

"He's the law, Tom," Cress observed soberly. "He can deputize as many men as he needs. If that isn't enough, he can call for the militia."

Greenway stiffened in his saddle and his seamed face grew stern and forbidding.

"That's strange talk, comin' from you," he got out accusingly. Under his bushy brows his faded eyes were shocked and incredulous. "Are you gettin' ready to back down?"

"No, not an inch," was the determined answer. "No matter what comes of Linscott's efforts, I intend to go on fighting this steal, and all it represents, until this end of the country is free of Rask's gang of plunderers. I've given this a lot of thought, Tom, and I don't see how we can beat it by defying the law. Oh, I know the law is rotten and how it was rigged against us! But it's the law!"

Greenway rared back. "I'm damned if it's my law!" he exclaimed. "Just because a bunch of highbinders get somethin' on the books is no reason the free people of this country have got to bend the knee to it! You didn't have no such idea the last time we talked. What's got into you, Cress? Have you got anythin' better to suggest?"

"I'll have something to say tonight. You may not think it's any better. But it will be what I believe. I'm as ready to fight as the next one, and without counting the cost, but I want to fight to win."

"We'll be glad to listen to you," Greenway said stiffly as he swung his horse and rode away.

Old Curly had overheard it all. He shook his head disgustedly.

"Sounds like yo're bucklin' under to me," he grumbled. "I don't know what kinda fightin' it is yo're gittin' ready to do, but it don't sound like yore pa's kind. Ki would turn over in his grave if he heard yuh shyin' away from buckin' the law jest 'cause it is the law. This'd still be Injun country if the men who pioneered this state hadn't fought back when some crook got a law put on the books!"

He started across the yard, muttering to himself. Cress called back.

"Get this straight, Curly! I'm bossing this outfit now. My way may not always be my father's way. When it isn't, just remember that it still is my way!"

"Yes, sir," the old man muttered.

Cress winced at the "sir," and he was halfway to town before he over-

came his annoyance with himself for having lost his temper with Curly. Several miles east of Wild Horse he overtook Cherry Grinnell, driving in on some errand for her father's Quarter Circle ranch. He tied his horse on behind the rig and got in with her.

"You're pretty this morning," he told her. "And skirts! This must be something special."

Cherry laughed. She was fond of Cress. Just how much he meant to her was an unanswered question in her mind.

"I have to remind myself once in a while that I'm a girl," she said. "But I don't mind telling you, Cress, that I'd be willing to trade these patent leather pumps for a comfortable pair of boots."

Cress grinned. "Why not take them off?"

CHERRY shook her head. "No, sir! I spent an extra half hour putting on this finery, and I'm not going to spoil the general effect."

She had a trim little figure. Clad in a pair of tight-fitting levis, and astride a bronc with ideas of its own, her dark hair flying, she was something to excite any man.

The merry light in her brown eyes faded as they drove along. The shadow that lay over this land touched her as much as it did Cress.

"We don't see you at Quarter Circle any more," she said. "I know how busy you must be, but I hoped you would ride over some evening. Things are not like they were for any of us. Father doesn't say much, but I know he's terribly worried. The situation looks hopeless to me. I hear a lot of brave talk, especially from Babe. He's so young and such a hothead, Cress! If trouble comes, I know he'll be in the thick of it . . . How much longer do you suppose it'll be before Mr. Linscott will know whether it's yes or no?"

"A day or two, Cherry. There's another meeting tonight; Greenway was at the house this morning. When it's over, I may not have many friends left around here."

Cress' tone was so enormously sober that she gazed at him with frank anxiety.

"What do you mean?" she demanded, a sharp edge of misgiving in her tone.

"I'm going to speak my mind. I didn't see this coming, but I realized as long as three years ago that we were at the mercy of the western half of the county. We could have done something about it; settlers tried to come in. The big outfits always turned them back."

"They were farmers, Cress!" Cherry was frankly aghast at his suggestion.

"Farmers, yes, and voters. There's thousands of acres of fine farm land between here and the peaks. But this was cow country, my father insisted; not an acre was to be put to the plow. The fact is that you can't name a brand that hasn't more range than it needs. Flat Iron could have moved back into the hills a bit, for one. It wasn't any use to say anything; I knew my father wouldn't listen. The old heads had their way, and you know the result; Wild Horse is still just a wide place in the road with its three hundred people. We pay taxes, but we don't have anything to say about how Box Elder County is run."

"Cress, it's too late for that!" Cherry spoke with a man's determination. "This thing is on us now, and we've got to fight the best way we can. You will turn people against you if you show up at that meeting tonight and repeat what you've just told me."

"What I'll have to say will be along that line," he answered unhesitatingly. "It's time someone spoke the truth and began using his brains."

Cherry kept her eyes on the team for a minute, saying nothing, her chin up.

"I'm sorry if you're displeased with me," Cress said. "I figured you'd understand if no one else did."

"I only know we've got to resist—stick together and fight with all we've got! To suggest anything now that might divide us is unthinkable.

even if we lose, let's go down fighting!"

Cress shook his head. "That sounds noble, going down to glorious defeat. But dying for a lost cause is nothing short of stupid when a way to win might have been found if we hadn't stubbornly refused to try to find that way. I've heard all the war talk that's going the rounds. I grew up on that sort of stuff. That's why I'm the last of the Bentons. I had three brothers. You know what happened to them. Have you asked yourself how you're going to feel if Babe is brought home dead? He's only a kid, but he'll be in this. So will a lot more no older than he. They're hollering the loudest right now; no matter what you do, you won't be able to keep them out of it."

Cherry Grinnell had been torturing herself for days with this very fear. Her pride and spirit would not let her confess it, however.

"Stubbornness is where you find it," she said. "You don't realize it, but once your mind is made up, it's as foolish to try to get you to change it as it was with your father. You've got courage, Cress. I imagine you'll need it. You'll certainly find the men disagreeing with you violently."

"I don't know how much courage I've got," he told her, "but I'm certainly going to state my convictions."

Cress failed to find a letter from Cheyenne awaiting him. A note in his box, however, said there was a telegram at the railroad office.

THE wire was from Linscott. It was brief and to the point. The injunction had been vacated. There was nothing further he could do. He was on his way to Wild Horse and would be there on the evening train.

It was only what Cress had been anticipating. It robbed the moment of any real disappointment. All the legal tactics had won a respite of barely two weeks. His own dams, as well as the others in the Wild Horse district, were still up. As he read the law, they were there in violation of it at that moment.

"It will bring things to a head in a hurry," he said to himself as he walked up from the station.

He decided against spreading the news before Linscott arrived. The evening train would be there early enough for them to have supper in town and reach Greenway's place in time for the meeting. He expected tempers to flare, not that the others were any less prepared for what had happned than he. It promised to provide anything but an auspicious moment for what he had to say.

"I won't put it off," he murmured. "Tomorrow or the next day would be too late. For whatever it's worth, I'm giving it to them tonight."

When Linscott arrived, he had little to say.

"Tomorrow's the first of July, Cress; I don't suppose these two weeks of sparring have helped you much. You understand, of course, that the whole matter reverts to Parker's original ruling. It means that anyone maintaining an obstruction to the natural flow of the river in District One can be hailed into court without further notice."

Cress nodded glumly. "You know what will happen. I don't believe you'll hear any complaint against you from those of us who've shared the expense of fighting this action. They know you've done all you could. But don't expect them to listen to your advice tonight. I've got a couple things to say to them, and I don't expect them to listen to me."

During supper at the shabby old Morgan House, the town's only hotel, Cress spoke freely of the course he proposed to take. Alva Linscott was frankly amazed.

"That's taking a long range view of it," he said. "And it's all right, Cress. But it will take nerve to stick it out alone, and that's what you'll have to do, I'm afraid. Your neighbors will hate the sight of you."

Cress's mouth tightened characteristically. "I can stand the hard names and all the rest of it just so long as I know I'm going in the right direction. I don't want any cheap victories. I told Bill Rask

what he could expect from me. I'm not letting anything get in the way of it."

Linscott gazed at his empty cup for a moment.

"Ki was never afraid to play a lone hand, no matter how stiff the odds were against him," he observed thoughtfully. "You go to it, Cress. You'll find me standing with you whenever you happen to need me. About tonight, though. . . You better hold in until I've left. There are reasons why I'd prefer not to sit in on anything that might be construed as a circumvention of the law. I guess you understand."

"Certainly," was Cress's answer. "I've hired a rig at the livery. I'll drive out with you and you can get back by yourself."

When they reached Greenway's ranch they found they were the last to arrive. Benches and chairs had been placed in the yard. Every owner in District One was there.

The unexpected appearance of the lawyer was almost explanation enough in itself of the purpose of his coming. Conversation died away as Linscott and Cress made their way up to the table where Tom Greenway sat. Cress felt the vague hostility in the glances that Greenway and Reb Grinnell and one or two others directed at him. He put it down to what had passed between Tom and himself that morning and to what Cherry might have said to her father. He pretended to ignore it.

Greenway stood up, his gaunt face graver than usual after a few whispered words with Linscott, and called the meeting to order.

"Alva is here with news for us," he said. "I'm sorry to say it's bad news. But I'll let him speak for himself."

LINSCOTT knew these men too well to dress up what he had to say in legal verbiage. All he could tell them was to repeat what he had said to Cress. The crowd listened in grim silence.

"I wish I could hold out some hope to you," he said. "The best I can do is to give you some advice. Bend all your energies to having this law changed; support a man for the legislature who will carry on your fight in the only way it can be carried on legally. I don't have to say anything about the law itself; we've been over that often enough. We know it's unfair; that it was accomplished by the foulest trickery. You can defy it temporarily and drench in bloodshed. But I'm warning you that every blow you strike will only make it more certain that you will lose in the end. Let me finish!" he cried as the crowd found its voice and began to howl him down. "Don't think any half-hearted attempt will be made to enforce this law! You're against it, and popular opinion across the state may be against it, but I tell you to remember that there's not a cowman in District Three, and very few in District Two, who isn't determined to have it carried out to the letter! They're organized, and they own the two assemblymen from this county lock, stock and barrel!

"They're the two men who sold you out!" he finished dramatically, his shaggy iron gray hair flying. "Eli Heffernan and Dan Horner! Until you've thrown them out of office and exposed them as Bill Rask's paid henchmen, you can fight till you're broke, or in jail, or both, and it won't change a thing!"

Cress had never seen Linscott whip himself up like this. The thought crossed his mind that Alva had deliberately set the stage for what he, himself, had to say.

Reb Grinnell had jumped up, angry as a hornet. "I'm not waitin' to git rid of Horner and Heffernan! I'm standin' on my rights as a free citizen to defend my property! My dam stays up till my second crop of alfalfa is on the way! The man who tries to pull it down is goin' to run into gunfire!"

That was what the crowd wanted to hear. Almost to a man they echoed his sentiments.

"I have nothing more to say, gentlemen," Linscott observed. "I'll bid you good night."

His going was the signal for tempers to boil over. Greenway got Cress's attention. "If you have any remarks to make, I'll hear them before we go any further."

Cress walked to the table and faced the crowd.

"I'll make this short," he said. "The headgates of Flat Iron's three dams are coming down tomorrow morning."

He couldn't have said anything more at the moment if he had tried. A bellow of wrath roared forth from the men. A dozen or more leaped to their feet, their faces stained with rage. Reb Grinnell made himself heard above the commotion.

"Jest what I told yuh, Greenway!" he cried. "He's walkin' out on us!" He fought his way up to Cress. "Proud as Ki was of you, I never thought I'd live to see the day that you'd bring shame on him! You sat on the porch of the Elkhorn with us a few hours before he was killed and heard him tell us his word was his bond; that he'd stick with us to the very end! You heard him say that if anythin' happened to him that his son would keep that promise for him!"

"I did, Reb." Cress's voice was tight and unwavering. "I'll keep that promise to the letter, but I'll keep it in my own way. If Tom repeated to you what I had to say this morning, you know about what that way is going to be. I don't propose to throw myself into a losing fight."

REASON was going out of these men. From three or four directions came cries to throw him out. He was not only called a double-crosser and a turn-coat but accused of being in league with the forces they were fighting. Help came from an unexpected source. Young Jim Cameron, whose range lay in the Little Medicines, climbed up on his chair.

"Don'e be so quick on the name calling!" he cried. "Benton has always been one of us! He's waited a long time to declare himself, but if he's got something on his mind, give him a chance to say it!"

Some of the cooler heads echoed this demand. The crowd gradually stilled its noise. In a hostile silence Cress raised his voice again.

"I've attended all the meetings. I haven't heard a word that gives me any reason to believe that what you plan has any chance of succeeding. If you weren't afraid to look this thing in the eye you'd realize it, too. Linscott just told you the truth. I couldn't add anything to that if I talked here all night. If you haven't anything better to suggest than drawing a deadline across this county and throwing lead at whoever attempts to enforce this water law, then I can't go along with you. But if you're willing to use your heads and try to outsmart Bill Rask and the crowd that's behind this steal, I'll go the whole way. I know the pinch can be staved off for a year."

"We're listening!" Jim Cameron shouted. "What's your idea?"

"Just this: I've read the law carefully. There's nothing in it as it stands now that says how high we can build our dams. Let Grinnell build his up about four feet. With some help, he can do it in a couple hours. When that's been done, get word to me; I'll open up. There's a lot of water in the river right now. When the crest reaches Grinnell's dam it will back up and go over the bank. You know what happened six years ago this spring, when we had the flood; all of Squaw Basin was put under water. It was fall before the last of it found its way into Witch Creek and back to the river. Let Rask and his water-master call it what they will. We'll call it an accident. It won't help all of us, but it will save those who need water most."

Greenway and the rest did not question but what it could be done. A few saw it giving them at least half a loaf, and they were inclined to favor it; others objected violently, and none so loudly as Reb Grinnell.

"It's no answer to our problem!" he railed. "We could only git away with it once, men! Some of my best graze is in Squaw Basin; it ain't fair to me to put it under water!"

"Is it grass you're going to be short of, or water?" Cress demanded thinly, his patience crumbling. It brought Tom Greenway down on him.

"That ain't the size of what you're proposin', Benton! When the flood filled up Squaw Basin there was little enough of it could be put to use! I'd be against your proposition if we could use every drop of it! To do what you say and then pull down our headgates would be to recognize this water law! The second we do that we're licked!"

"Wait a minute!" Cameron yelled. "There may be some difference of opinion about that, Tom! It isn't up to you to say what we'll do! Put this to a vote!"

That settled it; out of all those present only four could be found who favored the plan.

"That's answer enough," Cress told them. "My sympathies will be with you, but Flat Iron will have to stand alone."

In an ominous silence he started for his horse. He had not taken ten steps before he found Reb Grinnell blocking his way.

"You can't straddle the fence, Benton!" was Grinnell's ringing challenge. "You're either with us or ag'in us! If you try to touch your headgates, you'll be stopped!"

Gazing at the enraged man, his own face flat and uncompromising, Cress found it hard to believe that this was the old friend who had so often welcomed him to Quarter Circle and smiled his approval of his attentions to Cherry. He realized that this spelled the end of all that. He said:

"I hope you'll change your mind about attempting to stop me, Reb. If you don't, there'll be some blood spilled, and it will be your fault."

Cameron stepped in between them.

"I'll walk over to your horse with you, Benton," he said. "You've had your say and so has Grinnell."

"Much obliged," Cress muttered as he swung up into his saddle. "I'm sorry we never got to know each other better. I don't suppose we'll be friends the next time we meet."

"I'm afraid not. You've chosen a rough road to ride. I admire you for it. If I could afford it, I'd travel it with you. I wouldn't make the mistake of thinking that Reb was bluffing."

"I won't," Cress said as he rode away.

CHAPTER IV

The Die Is Cast

WHEN he reached Flat Iron, Cress went to the Bunkhouse and got Stony McCarran out of bed.

"I want you to find our wagon and tell Ryan I want to see him," he said. "Tell him it's urgent."

Cash reached the house about sun-up. Cress was waiting for him in the ranch office. The lines in the former's rocky face deepened as he listened to a frank account of what the past twenty-four hours had brought and of the position Flat Iron was taking.

"I've committed myself to this course and I'm going to fight it out along that line," Cress said at the end. "It means hard names and hatred for everyone connected with me. I believe that in the end the ones who have been first to turn against me will be glad to whistle another tune. But it will take time—perhaps a long time."

Ryan realized that he had to state his position.

"Its' going to take me a minute or two to get used to the idea of Flat Iron fighting its neighbors," he declared with his usual gravity. "Sometimes it takes bitter medicine to work a cure. I don't believe there's a wrong bone in your body, Cress. If this is the way you see it, then it's the way I see it. I don't care how many turns and bad spots we find in this trail if it'll only take us to where we can smash Bill Rask!"

"I didn't have any doubt about you, Cash," Benton said. "We've got some old hands in this outfit. They may not see this eye-to-eye with us. If they don't, they better be moving

on. All of us want to be of one opinion here. We've got a three-sided fight on our hands; there's likely to be dead men in it before it's over. I want you to make that plain to the crew. Give them their choice. If it's just wages they see, tell them it isn't worth it."

Ryan shook his head. "I wouldn't know where to begin, Cress. It's a grumbling, free-spoken crew, but there ain't a man on it who wouldn't go through hellfire for you. Old Curly's a sample of what I mean; he'll dress you down to your face, but just let someone else try it!"

"You're telling me what I wanted to hear," Cress's mouth had lost some of its severity. "I had every reason to know it for myself. But I've never taken this outfit into a fight before; I wanted to be sure. You catch the men at breakfast and tell them how things stand. They're entitled to know. . . How many have you got here?"

"Counting ourselves, ten."

"That'll be enough. We'll start with the lower dam. We ought to be able to knock all three down in a couple hours."

Flat Iron's southern line touched Quarter Circle within a few yards of the lower dam. Ryan and Cress discussed that for a minute. If trouble came, they were agreed they could expect it from that direction.

"If they mean business," said Cash, "they'll be able to pick us off before we get up to the dam. There's a little rise off there to the south; they could lay out on it without exposing themselves. We'll be in the open. . . How do you propose to handle this?"

"We'll let them fire the first shot. If they do, we'll go after them. The line won't mean a thing."

"All right," Ryan muttered. He started out only to turn back at the door. "We've got a dozen men with the wagon. I could have them here early this afternoon."

Cress said no. "We won't wait. I told them the headgates were coming down this morning. We'll stick to that."

HE HAD his breakfast. Old Curly had his horse at the rack by the time he finished. The old man was full of pepper this morning.

"Is thar any reason why I can't ride with yuh?" he demanded crustily. "I've still got one good ruckus in my system!"

Cress smiled. "You seemed to have changed your tune," he chided.

Curly brushed it off. "When I blew up yestiddy I didn't know what kinda cards yuh was holdin'. If this is the way to git Bill Rask, it's good enough for me! Wal, how about it? Do I go?"

Cress shook his head. "You stick here with Mac and the cook. If we get in over our heads it will be up to you to reach the wagon and get Tiny and the others down here in a hurry."

Ryan and the men rode across the yard together. Everyone of them had a rifle under his leg. Cress swung up, and they struck off toward the river at once.

They were in sight of the dam in half an hour. Cress put his glasses to his eyes and scanned the rise across the Quarter Circle line.

"They're there!" he announced. "Lots of 'em!"

Ross Santell swung his horse in close. He was a Flat Iron stalwart. "We can get across if we turn east a mile. It's the only way we can come up in back of them."

There was no question about that.

The dam was holding back so much water that the river had spread out to a width of a hundred yards; at the dam itself the water was far too deep to do anything but swim the horses across.

"I don't want to cross Grinnell's fence without provocation," Cress declared. "We'll see if they fire on us."

They were soon in rifle range of the men hidden on the rise. Cress and Ryan were the first to reach the dam. The latter ordered a rope to be tied to the top plank, that it might be pulled out. Santell and Frosty Roberts slid out of their saddles to do the job. The heavy planks had rings in them so that they could

be easily removed. The moment Santell touched the ring it brought a blast of gunfire. The shots were not close and were obviously intended as a warning.

"If that was a bluff, we'll call it!" Cress rapped. He took the rope out of Santell's hand and reached for the plank. It brought a prompt and vicious answer. The slugs spattered all around him. One pinged off the dripping plank and clipped his chin.

"Hold your fire!" he ripped out as he saw his men throw their rifles to their shoulders. "Let 'em think we don't want any of this! We'll go up the river and get through their fence! They'd cut us to ribbons down here!"

He sounded like old Ki now. Under his direction, they dropped back out of range without firing a shot. They swung their broncs then and rode hurriedly up the river for a mile.

"This is as good a spot as we'll find!" Ryan called out. He put his horse in the water and crossed. The others followed. It took them only a few minutes to knock down a section of Quarter Circle fence. They knew the men stretched out on the slope had them outnumbered. But their position was no longer an advantage.

"The fun's over," Cash got out harshly. "It's for keeps from now on. When you shoot, make it count!"

Cress nodded. "If you're ready, we'll go!"

They pulled their horses to a gallop in a few yards, swinging first away from the river and then back to it when they had the foe ahead of them.

Their guns began to talk as they swept over a low, intervening ridge. It brought an answering blast. The charge did not waver. The men on the slope dropped over the crest with their horses. But they had nothing but the river at their back now. Knowing they could not defend their position, they broke and fled.

"Let 'em go!" Cress shouted when Flat Iron topped the slope and he saw the invaders fleeing. "We can pull the planks from this side as well as the other. You take a man or two, Cash; the rest of us will cover you if they try to come at us again."

"All right, Ross; you and Roberts will do," Ryan said. "Let's get done with it!"

A CRY from Stony McCarran, who had come up the slope a few yards to the left, turned all heads that way.

"There's one of 'em down!" Stony yelled. "Git over here!"

They swung their horses that way quickly. A groan trickled over Cress's lips as he saw the still figure sprawled out in the sage.

"It's Babe Grinnell!" he exclaimed, bitter regret and indignation tearing through him. "What's Reb thinking of to send a kid like that out against us?"

"I got a purty good look at 'em," Stony growled. "They were all kids. I ain't havin' no mercy on 'em! Look at this arm! I'm bleedin' like a stuck pig!"

"Kids!" Ryan snapped scornfully. "I reckon that explains why we climbed over them so easy!" He turned down to the dam with Frosty Roberts and Ross; there was a job to be done here and it was his first consideration.

Benton had leaped to the ground. At first glance he thought the boy was dead, but a quick examination of the head wound that had felled him showed that it was not serious.

"Somebody get a hatful of water," Cress ordered.

Babe opened his eyes when the water was dashed into his face. He glared at Benton and the Flat Iron men defiantly.

"You rats! I hate the sight of you!" he muttered venomously. "Don't touch me, Benton! I'll get along without any help from you!"

"You young fool!" Cress rapped. "What were you kids doing, mixing in this? Where's your father?"

"That's none of your business!" was the sullen answer. "I tell you to leave me alone! Pull down your

dam! You won't get 'em all down!"

He had said more than he intended. Benton got the explanation at once.

"So that's how it is, eh? Reb thought we'd go after the upper dam first; you kids took it on yourselves to take care of matters down here if we happened to come this way."

The planks were coming down already. The water was roaring over them in a mighty sheet. Even after the last plank had been removed it would take half an hour for the released water to run off. Cress realized that it would be foolish and dangerous to wait there that long to get across.

"I'm tying up your head and taking you to the Flat Iron house whether you like it or not," he told Babe. To the men, he said, "As soon as Ryan is finished we're pulling away from here. We'll go back the way we came. You take this young pup in with you, Stony. Mac will look after your arm. You tell Curly to high-tail it for the wagon and get every man there headed for our high dam."

Carrying Babe Grinnell with them, they started moving back up the river as soon as the gates had been removed.

"We won't need those planks for some time," Cress remarked to Ryan. "But they'll go up again!"

Cash jerked an affirmative nod. "About this shooting," he said. "It must have been heard a long way on a still morning like this."

"It's three miles to the high dam," Benton replied, understanding what was on the other's mind. "What little wind there is is blowing away from them."

He explored the valley with his glasses. If Grinnell had sent anyone down to investigate the shooting, Cress failed to see anything of him. It was his intention, once they were across the river, to pull down the middle dam before proceeding any further. That done, he planned to swing off into the hills, intercept Tiny Starbuck and the rest of the crew coming down from the Peaks, and strike Grinnell from the rear.

HOW strong Reb's force was remained a question. That he had more than a dozen men with him seemed unlikely.

"They can't make us any trouble up there unless they've cut deep into our range," Cash observed. "That's a step I don't believe Greenway and some others would take, no matter how worked up they are. You'll find Grinnell wasn't able to sell this idea to too many. But they won't run like these kid did!"

"They'll run when they see the jig is up." Cress Benton's mouth had a grim set. "A little straight thinking would have avoided all this."

They recrossed the Medicine and pulled down the gates of the middle dam unopposed. They had hours to wait now before they could expect to see anything of the rest of the crew. Cress realized that when the water began to drop up above that Reb and his followers would know what had happened. He agreed with Cash that it would only make them more determined than ever to make a fight of it.

They moved away from the river, and the hills soon hid it from view. The men talked among themselves, well satisfied with the way the morning had gone. Ryan and Cress rode in the lead, holding their broncs to a walk; time was not important now. When they reached the trees that fringed the course of a little creek, they pulled up.

"Might as well kill an hour or so here," Cress told them. "It's as pleasant a place as we'll find."

The men rolled out of their saddles and let their horses drink. Uncle Luke Wiggins pulled off his boot. There was blood in it.

"Why didn't you say something about that?" Cress demanded sharply.

"It ain't nuthin'," Uncle Luke assured him. He had a cud of tobacco in his mouth. After washing the wound, he slapped the tobacco on it and tied it up.

Wiggins was not over twenty-eight, and, so far as anyone knew, he was nobody's uncle. He was a grin-

ning, tousel-headed man, with an eye for a pretty face. Down in Cheyenne at the rodeo, several years back, he had sought to advance himself with a young woman by minding her baby for a moment. One of the boys had heard the child call him Uncle Luke. Wiggins had never lived it down. Cash had found him a handy man. When any blasting had to be done on the ranch, Uncle Luke handled it. He listened to Cress and Ryan discussing what was to be done.

"I could settle this business in a hurry," he observed, speaking to neither particularly. "No need of waitin' around for Tiny. A couple sticks of dynamite would do the trick. We could git up above the dam a mile and build a raft. Tie a few sticks of the stuff on it and set tt adrift; that's all there'd be to it! Water enough spillin' over to carry a raft down to the gate purty quick. If them birds saw anythin' like that headin' at 'em they'd pull in their horns and start driftin'. If yuh was in back of 'em, yuh could keep 'em goin'."

Santell and the others who had overheard him began to laugh. They always got a good share of their amusement out of Uncle Luke. He turned on them with a cutting rejoinder.

"Yuh don't recognize horse sense when yuh hear it! A little lead ticklin yore kidneys might wipe some of the fog outa yore brains!" He turned to Cress. "Course, I'm figgerin' that yuh ain't aimin' to see how many of them gents yuh can rub out; that all yuh want is to give 'em the run and do as yuh please with yore own property."

"You give Uncle Luke a front seat on that steamboat, Cress, an' let him do the steerin'!" Frosty Roberts suggested with a raucous laugh.

Benton checked the crew's amusement. "Wait a minute!" he said. "This may not be as wild as it sounds. It certainly wouldn't cost anything to try it, and it might turn the trick."

"If it does anything it'll blow the dam sky high," Ryan declared pessimistically. "Your father always said it cost better than three thousand. That's quite a gouge to take out of yourself and call it nothing."

"I CAN stand that a lot better than some of the scars I might get out of this," said Cress.

He and Cash talked it over for a few minutes.

"All right," Ryan gave in. "If we're going to do it, we'll do it right." He turned around to Uncle Luke. "You ride into the house, Wiggins, and get your dynamite. Take Stormy with you. When you get there you better load up the timbers you'll need; chances are we couldn't find anything up above that would do for a raft. Tell Macpherson I said he was to give you whatever you want. When you start back, don't drive this way; head east for the broken butte. We'll wait there for you."

They had been there some time before they caught a glimpse of the two men and the wagon moving across the range. It was some distance to the river, the last of it so steeply downhill that they had to unload the wagon and carry the timbers and other things the last hundred yards. The dam could be seen, a mile away.

"Nothing moving down there," Benton announced after using his glasses. "Not a sign of a horse."

"Hidden back in the buckrush," Cash muttered laconically.

It did not take them long to knock a raft together. The stream was narrow here and moving slowly. Cress tossed a piece of wood in the water. There was current enough to carry it down to where the backed-up water spread out. The stick moved slower when it reached it, but it bobbed on.

"I guess we don't have to worry about the raft reaching the dam," he remarked. Wiggins was arranging the fuse. "How are you going to calculate the time?" Cress asked.

Uncle Luke stood up and screwed his homely face into a hard squint at the dam. "Fifteen minutes ought to be enough," he declared weightily. "I'll give her a little more. This is

a slow fuse I'm usin'; I can figger her purty well. Better to be a little late than too soon with this stuff."

He was ready a few minutes later. The raft was pushed into the water. Wiggins waded in with it and lit the fuse. A final push from him sent the clumsy weapon of destruction on its way. Eyes remained glued on it until it struck the backwater. An audible sigh of relief went up as the raft continued its drift.

Ryan glanced at Benton. "Shall we get across?"

"We might as well. If we climb that ridge we can follow it all the way down and have pretty good cover."

They crossed the stream quickly. Once on the ridge they could see the raft slowly drifting toward the dam. Its progress dictated their own pace, for they could not afford to run ahead of it. The men were a silent, sober lot as they moved along. Cress and Ryan shared their tenseness.

"Use your glasses again," Cash muttered. "If they've got their eyes open they must have spotted the raft by now."

"Nothing stirring," Cress reported. "Be rich if there was no one there. Babe could have taken me in; he's smart. If we find we've destroyed the dam for no reason, I won't be able to blame anyone but myself. It's too late now to do anything about. . . Wait!" His hands clasped the binoculars a little tighter. "They're there, Cash!" he ground out. "I see two of them—they just crawled up on the bank at the right end of the dam! They're pointing to the raft—"

He handed the glasses to Ryan. The latter clapped them to his eyes. "Yeh," he growled. "I see 'em! Reb Grinnell and Steve Hoffman! They're calling back to somebody in that patch of tall brush. If they stick there till that stuff goes off we'll pick 'em up in pieces!"

The word was passed along to the men.

"Three or four minutes will tell the story now," Benton cautioned. "If they break, use your spurs and start throwing lead! We'll see them the moment they pop out of the brush!"

THE raft and its deadly load was steadily moving toward the dam. It had less than a hundred yards to go when eleven mounted men broke cover and darted up the ridge on which Flat Iron was advancing. A spattering blast from Benton's riders turned them back. In a few seconds they had the tall buckrush between them and the Flat Iron. They ripped the morning air to shreds with their answering gunfire. But there was no safety for them where they were; they knew the meaning of the raft. In another minute the dam would be rocketing into the sky. It forced a decision on them, and quickly. When they broke out of the brush this time they were flattened out on their broncs, with no intention in them but to get away.

The ridge began flattening out at the dam. A quarter of a mile beyond it disappeared altogether. Grinnell's bunch realized they had to get away from the river quickly or be swept away in the flood that would engulf them when the dam went out.

Benton was thinking of that, too. Flat Iron was in no danger from the water, but to take up the chase and be caught abreast the dam at the moment the explosion occurred could be disastrous. The raft was banging against the headgates by now. How much time remained before the fuse completed its work could only be guessed at.

"We've got to take a chance!" he called to Ryan. "Keep as high up as we can and move fast!"

Without waiting to hear more the crew broke away, pulling their horses to a driving gallop. To keep up with them Cress had to use the steel on his big gray horse. Ryan pounded along behind him.

They had just passed the dam when the dynamite went off with a terrific, ear-splitting blast. The earth trembled beneath them, and the shattered headgates, splintered to kindling wood, filled the air. The released tons of water shot through the opening with a banshee howl.

Benton glanced down at the dam. Not only the gates were gone but most of the masonry. Unaware that a piece of flying concrete had struck Ryan's bronc and dropped it before Cash could jump clear, he raced on with the others.

The crest of the torrent overtook Grinnell's force. It left them no choice but to turn to the south and take to the open range. It put them in complete retreat without any hope of trying to make a stand. The consistency with which Flat Iron's slugs kept pace with them, kicking up puffs of dust ahead and behind them, told them plainly that if they weren't being cut down it was only because Benton did not want it that way. It spelled absolute defeat for them, and they knew it.

Cress realized that Ryan was not with him. It gave him a bad moment, but he refused to call a halt until the chase had driven Reb's crowd back on their own range.

"What became of Ryan?" he demanded. "Did anyone see him go down?"

Uncle Luke and the others shook their heads. It took all the edge off the success they had won. Cress swung his bronc and raced back over the way they had come. When they reached the dam they found Ryan sitting up. He had a sprained and badly bruised right leg.

"Don't have to ask how things went," Ryan said, looking them over. "You moved 'em out in a—"

"How badly are you hurt, Cash?" Cress cut in.

"I'll be laid up three or four days. It's a tough break being put on the shelf right now," Ryan complained. "Work to be done and trouble breaking all around us!"

"Thank God it's no worse than it is," said Benton. "We'll carry you to the wagon and get you in."

He examined the wrecked dam for a minute.

"Uncle Luke shore tore the bowels out of it, didn't he?" little Stormy Winters observed.

CRESS nodded. "When the time comes, we'll rebuild it."

They got Ryan to the wagon and back to the house. Cress left Stormy at the broken butte to meet the men coming down from the peaks and ride in with them. It was late in the afternoon before they rode in. Cress called Tiny Starbuck to the office and told him he was acting straw boss till Ryan got back on the job.

"Cash says three or four days," he said, "but it will be longer than that. I want you to push the work, Tiny. What happened down here today is only the beginning; we'll see things flame all the way to the Crossing, I'm afraid. I want to be ready for it."

Stony McCarran was around with his arm in a sling, sputtering because he had missed the fight. Cress wasn't worried about Stony. He was concerned, however, about getting Babe Grinnell home.

"I'll take him down myself this evening," he said to Cash. "That'll be the best way out of it."

He was in the office, just before supper, when he heard someone drive in. He was surprised to find it was Cherry. He stepped out to meet her.

"Have you got Babe here?" she asked, her tone cold and strained. She saw where his chin had been cut, but she ignored it.

"Yes; I was going to drive down with him this evening," said Cress. "There isn't much wrong with him, Cherry. Won't you come in?"

"No!" she answered with withering contempt. "I hope never to set foot in this yard again. If you'll bring Babe out that will be all you can do for me."

Cress's mouth tightened grimly as he gazed at her. "I suppose that's the way it's got to be. I'm sorry."

"You have every right to be," she charged. "It wasn't bad enough that things were so desperate; you had to stab us in the back."

"You'll regret having said that some day," Cress returned without anger. He turned into the house and got Babe. When the boy had been placed in the rig, Cherry drove off without a word.

Benton watched them go, standing there until the team was out of

sight. There was a bitter regret stamped in his gray eyes.

"That's what is going to hurt the most—knowing she's against me!" he muttered bleakly.

CHAPTER V

Backdown or Fight

CRESS rode into Wild Horse three days later. He knew there was a lot of feeling against him, but he came alone. He did not intend to permit the situation to interfere with his coming and going on his lawful business. Flat Iron was the best customer most of the local merchants and the bank had, so he was not surprised to discover that he still had some friends in town. They couldn't support him openly at the moment, Cal Stark, the banker, explained, but they'd come out for him at the first propitious moment.

"Pete Nasby, the water-master for District One, showed up yesterday," Stark told him. "I understand that he was run off the Quarter Circle. It's only the beginning of his troubles, Cress. I wouldn't take his job at four hundred a day."

Benton was not particularly interested, and he said so. "I'm not going to become involved in what happens along the river. I predicted how it would go, and nothing has happened to make me change my mind. Mistake will be piled on mistake before men like Greenway and Reb realize that they've only played into Rask's hands."

The banker nodded. "It's too bad. Speaking of Rask, have you heard that he's bought the Sylvain place, west of the Crossing?"

Cress's head went up. "No," he answered, not trying to conceal his chagrin. "When did that happen?"

"Yesterday. He evidently expects to have some water down there. It puts Triple K on your west line, doesn't it?"

"Yes, and I don't like it!"

Cress carried the news home to Cash.

"Thinks he's crowding you—that's why he bought it!" Ryan growled. His face was so rocky it looked as though it might have been hacked out with a cleaver. "Trouble will come of it!" he predicted.

"And not the kind of trouble I want. I haven't any time to waste sniping at that skunk across a fence. That's not how I plan to pull him down. But if that's the way it's got to be, he won't find me walking away from him." Cress changed the subject abruptly. "I got a letter off to Linscott. I asked him to get in touch with a good engineer in Cheyenne or Denver and show up here with him as soon as it's convenient. I want to find out what there is to my idea that the water in Wolf Lake can be brought down here, and how much it will cost. We own it; it's a nice piece of scenery, but it's never been worth a dime to Flat Iron."

Ryan shook his head emphatically. "That's a wild dream. I know it's a shame to see that water trickling down the other side of the mountains and losing itself in the desert, but it will cost ten times what it's worth to do anything with it."

"Maybe," Cress murmured. "That's what I want to find out."

WORD reached the ranch the following day that Pete Nasby had been taken out of his room in the Morgan House in Wild Horse during the night by a party of masked men and given a coat of tar and feathers.

"That puts it up to Kinnard," Benton told Ryan. He had just come in from inspecting the fence on the new Flat Iron-Triple K line. "It's sheer nonsense to think that such tactics will discourage anyone. Rask must be grinning from ear to ear. He'll see to it that the Ledger plays it up as open defiance of the law. It won't win any sympathy for the Wild Horse district."

"How did you find the fence?" Ryan asked.

"It's in good shape. It can stand a few new posts. Have you been hobbling around on that bad leg this morning?"

"A little," Cash confessed. "I

can't stand sitting penned down here. I thought I'd ride up to the wagon tomorrow and see how Tiny is doing."

"He's doing all right," Benton said flatly. "I can handle the fencing job. I want you to stay put for the rest of this week. I need you too much to take any chances on your overdoing it right now."

Cash grumbled over what he called "babying." "Was there any signs of activity on Rask's new range?"

"I didn't see anyone. It may be a day or two before he moves in. I'll go down with a fencing wagon and three or four men tomorrow."

He took Santell, Roberts, Dutch Schilling and Uncle Luke with him. They had less than a day's work.

"Just a few minutes after four," Benton said, glancing at his watch as they finished. Several times during the afternoon he thought he had caught the faint murmur of shooting. "Being this near to the Crossing, I'm going to ride in and see what old Bat knows. He usually has all the gossip that's going up and down the river."

"Better let me side you," Santell suggested. He had heard those little, scattered puffs of sound, too. Cress grinned faintly.

"I'd appreciate your company, Ross," he said, "but I don't need a bodyguard."

"Fair enough," Santell told him. "I'll just tag along for the conversation. Shall we cut across to the river or follow the fence?"

"The fence will do." Flat Iron fell short of reaching the Crossing by less than a mile. New wire had been strung from where they knocked off work all the way to Medicine River. "I know it's all right," Benton said, "but I won't mind having a look at it."

Using the Medicine as an east-west baseline, the fence came in at a sharp angle from the northeast, giving the ranch a spearhead of range between the river and Rask's new holding.

They found the long stretch of new wire in excellent condition. The graze was so good here that Flat Iron used it in early spring and again in the fall, moving the cattle into higher range during the summer.

"The grass is doing fine," Ross remarked as they rode along. "Must be two feet of top soil over this whole stretch of country."

"All of that," Cress agreed. "It's too good to get nothing but a crop of grass off it. Oats and wheat would do well."

Santell laughed and also flicked a questioning glance at Benton. "You ain't thinking of going in for farming, are you?"

"No, not me. But that's no reason why someone shouldn't get the most out of this land. Say farming to you fellows and you choke. It was the same way when barbed wire came in. My father swore it would ruin this range. What did they say when sheep appeared on the Laramie planes? Going to run cowmen out of business, was the cry. The sheep are there by the thousands now and this state is producing more beef than it ever did."

"That's a little different," Ross protested stoutly. "When you start turning the grass under it's gone forever."

"What's wrong with that if you get something better to take its place? There's room here for both the plow and the cow. The soil itself will be dividing line enough. There must be eighty to a hundred thousand acres of good farm land in this part of the county. I could show you a good part of it without stepping off the Flat Iron. Think of the bottom land Jim Cameron's got along the Little Medicine. And yet it would hardly make a dent in what can never be anything but grazing country."

BENTON saw Santell shudder. He knew Ross had run away from a farm back in Minnesota as a boy. "Don't worry," he said with a laugh, "I don't expect to ask you to turn in your saddle for a plow."

They pulled up for a moment when they caught sight of the riv-

er, cocking their ears for the sound of guns.

"Quiet as the grave," Ross said. "Did it sound like a fight to you?"

"No, more like a little skirmishing. Maybe Bat can tell us something about it." Cress unlocked the Flat Iron gate.

They had the Crossing in front of them a few minutes later. On the new maps it was called Sioux Crossing, but locally no one ever referred to it by that name. It was either Indian Crossing or just the Crossing. It was the best fording of Medicine River in twenty miles. The weather-beaten, ramshackle building in which Bat Chadron dispensed whisky, tobacco and a few staples, like sugar and coffee, was the only one there.

Chadron was asleep in a chair outside the door when Benton and Santell rode up, his enormous paunch spilling out over his lap. Bat had been a tough customer in his day. He still liked other men's beef and did not deny that he slaughtered a steer when he needed meat. But he had grown harmless with the advancing years.

"You, Benton!" he called, rousing himself as they got down. "No see you for long time." Flat Iron had made him trouble on several occasions in the past, but he bore Cress no ill will.

"So this is how you spend your time!" Benton said chafingly. "You're fat as a pig, Bat. Don't you do anything but sleep and eat?"

"Oh, I drink a little, too." Chadron winked broadly and then laughed uproariously at his own jest.

"You're a very funny fellow," Cress assured him. "Suppose you separate yourself from that chair and get inside and set out your bottle. . . You remember Santell—?"

"Sure! Didn't he try to kill me that time up in the Grand Coulee?"

"I was shooting at you, all right," Ross remarked. "You used to be pretty handy with a running iron in those days."

"That was a long time ago, Santell," Bat sighed regretfully. "Them days won't come again. She was a wild, free country then. But she's all gone to hell." He got to his feet and snapped his suspenders. "If a man wants a piece of beef for the pot, he's purty near got to buy it today."

"Pretty near," Ross agreed. "You better not try any of your old habits on this new neighbor of yours."

"Bill Rask, yuh mean?" Chadron shrugged cynically. "He won't bother me." He shuffled in behind the bar.

"Have you seen anything of him?" Benton asked.

"Yeh, him and Mulhall stopped here yesterday. They're bringin' a crew in in a day or two and throwin' a lot of stock on the range. Buck Marr is goin' to ramrod the spread for Rask. Jules Sylvain worked that little outfit with a couple men; I don't know why Rask figgers he needs a big crew for the job."

"Don't you?" Benton demanded bluntly. "You used to be smarter than that."

Big Bat paused in the act of setting out the glasses. Behind their rolls of fat his round little eyes were bright and shrewd. "Look out for him, Cress. He don't intend to stop where he is. When Grinnell and some others go broke, he'll be there to buy 'em out at his price. Tellin' you once is all the favor I can do you; you know how I'm goin' to be fixed with him on my doorstep."

BENTON thanked him with a nod. Bat was a dishonest, dirty, whisky-soaked left-over from the past, but his friendly interest was not to be disparaged on that account.

"If something came up that I ought to know, you could get word to me?" Cress suggested.

Bat filled the glasses. "I don't promise nothin'," he muttered. "Here's lookin' at yuh!" He tossed the silver dollar that Benton dropped on the bar into a cigar box. "What brought you down this way today?"

"Doing some work on the fence. . . What was that shooting we heard this afternoon, Bat?"

Chadron ran a hand over his sag-

ging jowls. "I wouldn't know. What time was it?"

"About an hour and a half ago."

"I musta been asleep. Was it on the river?"

"Sounded as though it might be."

"I reckon that's the answer. The sheriff's in the neighborhood." Bat couldn't have been more matter-of-fact if he had referred to the weather. Cress straightened.

"Kinnard?" he demanded.

"Yeh. Went up this noon. Had a big nuch of deputies with him." Big Bat spread his hands deploringly. "It's just what I told you! The country's gone all to hell! It shows you what it's got to when you see Rip ridin' into this country to make the goin' safe for a stink worm like Pete Nasby! Kinnard used to be a man."

"He still is," Benton assured him.

There was a little streak of water on the bar. Cress made marks across it with his thumbnail, likening it to the river, in his mind.

"That's where it was," he said without looking up, drawing a line across the trail of water. "Greenway's dam! Any sound of shooting up there would have just about reached us." He dried his hand on his shirt. "If there's one place along the river that can be defended, that's it."

Ross nodded; he was familiar with the terrain. "The hills pinch in close to the Medicine there," he said. He glanced at Chadron. "Which side of the river did Kinnard take when he passed the Crossing?"

"The south bank." Bat poured another drink. "You could git mixed up in this awful easy, Cress," he observed with obscure interest. "If your range is crossed to git at certain parties from the rear, how you goin' to explain it?"

"I'll explain it by seeing that it doesn't happen."

"I thought the sheriff had the right-of-way on official business," Santell volunteered.

"It's not Rip I'm thinking about," Benton said flatly.

"Nor me," Bat echoed.

It was a warning. Bat would say no more, but Benton understood him perfectly. He and Ross were ready to leave a few minutes later when they heard the drumming of a horse. A rider dashed across the river. It was Kinnard. He walked into Bat's place and was proof against any sign of surprise at finding Cress and Santell there. He took it for granted that they knew what his business was on the river.

"I'm looking for grub," he said. "I've got to feed the bunch I brought in. See what you can find, Bat. I'll have to borrow a coffee pot and frying pan, too. Shake it up a little; I want to get back."

"When I saw you pull up here, I thought you might be looking for help," Benton told him.

"I've got men enough. It'll take a little time. This is a tough nut to crack, everything considered. I haven't fired a shot yet." He shook his head as he beat off an unpleasant thought. "I'll have to, or pull a miracle."

Te helped himself to a drink.

"I'm glad you didn't find it necessary to go up on this side of the river," Cress observed. "Flat Iron is out of this, Rip."

"I hope you can stay out," was Kinnard's blunt answer. "You've used your head so far; I knew you would. You want to keep on using it."

BENTON did a little reading between the lines and thought he found the answer.

"You better pass a little of the same advice along to Rask," he said quietly. "He's moving a big crew up to his new property. More men than the work calls for is not the usual Triple K way of doing business. It looks suspicious. I was ready to believe he was getting set to square off at me. Now I'm not so sure."

Kinnard looked up with his veiled, inscrutable eyes. "If not that—what else?"

"He could be figuring to come to your assistance."

"Not if I know it." Rip shoved his glass away with a sharp gesture

of annoyance. "I want to settle this trouble with as little violence as I can. Bill wouldn't be any help to me."

Chadron stuck his head in from the next room. "I got a side of bacon," he said. "How big a piece do you want?"

"I'll take all of it. Better give me a small sack of flour, too."

"You're getting grub enough for two or three days," Benton remarked. Kinnard nodded.

"It may take two or three days."

Cress and Santell pulled out for home before the sheriff left. They had little to say as they rode along. The Crossing was several miles behind them before Ross said, "Now that you've had a chance to think it over, what do you make of it?"

"I'm going to put some men down here in the morning, and the minute Tiny and the boys finish up above, I'm shipping them in, too. If Rask has the idea that he's going to cut across this range to get at Grinnell and the others from the rear, I'll change his mind for him. No matter how wrong I think that crowd is, I don't propose to see them put up against Rask's gunslingers."

Benton spoke to Ryan as soon as he reached the house.

"I think you've put your finger on it," Cash agreed. "When Rask comes through our fence his excuse will be that he's rushing to the sheriff's aid. If he gets away with it he'll be killing two birds with one stone."

"There's just one way to stop him," was Cress's flinty answer.

"Just one way," Ryan echoed. "Whether Tiny finishes up by tomorrow evening or not, I'd haul him down here. This thing won't wait."

Benton knew this was the truth. He found the wagon working close to the broken butte the next morning. The news he brought spurred the men on, but they could not finish. At five o'clock, Cress called them off.

"It leaves the Grand Coulee unworked," he said to Starbuck. "I suppose there's a lot stuff in there."

"Quite a bunch," Tiny admitted.

"Well, we'll have to leave them for another day. It'll be after dark when we reach the house. We'll have supper there and move on west. We won't wait for the wagon; it can catch up with us during the night. The boys won't need their blankets anyhow."

When he rode into the yard he looked for Cash on the gallery. Cash was not there. Cress rang the bell for Curly.

"Where's Ryan?" he demanded.

"He rode below this afternoon," the old man informed him. "Said sittin' here was more'n he could stand. Yuh can't blame him."

Benton let it go at that. He surmised, however, that it wasn't only Ryan's impatience with his inactivity that had prompted him to join Ross and the rest who were riding Flat Iron's line in the vicinity of Indian Crossing; the man had a sixth sense for scenting impending trouble, and the need for his presence.

It was enough to send Cress into the dining room to inform the crew they were to clip off every minute they could.

"Cash has had another one of his hunches, "he told them. "He's in no condition to ride, but he pulled out of here for the Crossing this afternoon. The sooner we get started the better I'll like it."

THESE men had put a long day's hard, grinding work behind them, but they were eager for what lay ahead. They had groused and complained because they had been cheated out of the fight at Flat Iron's high dam; this promised to be different, and they would be standing up to their traditional enemy, rather than fighting old friends. They cut their supper short and got up fresh saddle stock.

Cress was waiting for them. He raised his hand. The signal set them in motion and they pounded out of the yard. Someone raised his voice in a shrill, fighting yell. The others took it up with a will. Their exuberance was succeeded by a grim sobriety before they had put the first mile behind them, and with an acute

awareness of what the night might bring taking possession of them as they settled down to the long ride, and only the creaking of saddle leather and rhythmic drumming of their ponies' hoofs broke the stillness of the pleasant, peaceful night.

The moon swung up over the Stepping Stone Peaks, turning the world to silver and casting sharp, moving shadows that the running broncs could never quite overtake. The minutes fled. At the end of an hour Cress turned in his saddle and glanced back at his men. They were well bunched.

"Keep your ears cocked!" he called to them. "We're getting near enough to hear shooting if there is any!"

It was strange, he thought, that the only question in his mind was whether they would get there in time or not. The rest he seemed to take for granted. He would stop Rask tonight, and tomorrow night, or any other night; but he realized that in itself it would not decide anything, at least not the important issue.

"I've got to keep remembering that," he said to himself. "No matter how this goes I mustn't get in the way of my plans."

No tell-tale sputtering of gunfire reached him. The course they had set had brought them to the fence, and they swung off now and rode with it always in view. The night was bright enough to see a fair distance. Benton kept glancing ahead, thinking it was time to be catching sight of the men riding guard with Ryan.

Tiny Starbuck swept in close to him. "They must be in a jam, Cress!" he called across. "Cash's got his men pulled in or we'd have seen one of them by now!"

"We'll know in a few minutes!" Benton answered. "We're not far from the river now."

"There they are!" Tiny pointed to a little knoll several hundred yards back from the fence.

The knoll was only twenty-five to thirty feet high, but it was the only elevation in several square miles. That Ryan had gathered his men there, where they could command a view of what went on across the fence and also have the advantage of the knoll's defensive possibilities, was evidence enough that a clash had already occurred, or was imminent.

BENTON and Starbuck swung that way, and the rest followed. Once they had the knoll between themselves and the fence, they raced up the gentle slope. Ryan was waiting for them.

"Did they come at you?" Cress demanded.

"They tried to get through about thirty minutes ago. No shots were fired. I told Rask we'd kill the man that tried to cut our wire. He claims Kinnard sent for help; that he's got a right to come through."

"Rask, himself, eh?" Benton's mouth was hard and straight. "That sounds like he means business. How many men has he with him?"

"I counted twelve. They're a picked lot; he's pulled them in from all over. I recognized Buck Marr, Chip Durant—Ferd Smiley. They're Triple K's gunmen."

"You gave him the right answer, Cash! Where are they now?"

"They pulled back in the direction of the Crossing. I told Bill you'd be along; that if had any more to say, to say it to you."

"What did he have to say that?"

"Nothing," Ryan suggested dividing their force. "One of us take a bunch down to the river; the other stay here," he said. "That wolf may try to get around us in the corner down there."

"Right," Benton agreed. "I don't suppose you can get out of your saddle."

"I'm all right," Cash muttered crustily.

"Well. You stay here; I'll take the river."

He had just finished naming the men who were to accompany him when a warning cry from Uncle Luke swung him around.

"They're comin', Cress!" Wiggins growled. "Off there on the left!"

Benton located the riders. They

pulled up when they were still a safe distance back from the fence. One detached himself from the others and rode forward alone, his right hand held up above his head in the signal for a parley.

"It's Rask!" Ryan jerked out suspiciously. "Going to talk it over after all—or have his gang burn you down when he gets you out there alone! I'm telling you to watch out for this! I don't like the smell of it a bit!"

"Nor I!" Tiny Starbuck seconded. "What Cash told him ought to be enough! Why take a chance with that rat?"

Benton's tightly locked lips thinned to a forbidding line. Though he had only to recall the fate that had overtaken his father to realize how fully Cash and Tiny were justified in warning him against treachery, nothing could have kept him from going out to meet Bill Rask.

"This is something I've been waiting for," he said, a frosty glitter in his cold gray eyes. "I told him I'd pull his teeth, and the first one comes out tonight!"

CHAPTER VI

Guns in the Night

AS HE rode down the knoll and up to the fence Benton was glad that he had Ryan back there. Banged-up leg or not, Cash was a man to have with you when the going got tough. He also had time to realize that if Flat Iron had got here first, he could thank Bat Chadron. But for the bit of information that big Bat had passed on to him Triple K would not have had anything in its way tonight.

"You find strange friends in strange places," he muttered.

Rask was waiting for him, sitting his horse easily, an arrogant slant to his heavy mouth. They gave each other a measuring, hostile glance.

"I thought you were too smart to try anything like this, Benton," Bill whipped out at once. "The sheriff of this county is in a jam; he sent to me for help. I'm only doing my duty in trying to get to him; I'm not asking any favors from you."

Cress shook his head. "I'll believe Kinnard appealed to you when I hear it from his own lips, not before. But even an okay from him wouldn't get you through here. Ryan gave you my answer. I've nothing to add to it."

"Forget about Ryan!" Rask retorted angrily. "I don't do business with foremen. Or is he headman here?"

"He spoke with my authority," Cress returned evenly, ignoring the taunt. "Don't waste your breath telling me I'm defying the law. You'll find I don't scare worth a cent. You're not agitated about reaching Kinnard. If you were you'd turn back to the Crossing and go up the other side of the river. What you figured to do was to slip through the back door into this scrap, turn your gunslingers loose and make it appear that I had been a party to the double-cross." He topped it off with a thin, mocking laugh, hoping to goad the other into some foolish outburst.

It failed of its purpose. Furious though he was, Rask held himself in. "You'll regret this, Benton!" he warned. That was all he had to say. He raised his bridle rein and spoke to his horse.

To have him take defeat so easily was not what past experience had taught Cress to expect from him. It rang an alarm bell in his brain.

"You wouldn't mean regret it the second I turn my back?" he queried pointedly. "Figuring you might have someone like Ferd Smiley lying out in the sage with orders to cut me down, I took a few precautions myself. If you lift a finger, you'll find out what they are."

Rask flicked a parting glance at him, trying to decide whether Benton was bluffing or not. He had stacked the cards for a quick showdown here. A movement of his hand to hat brim would have brought the crash of guns. He had always been exceedingly careful of his own hide, however, and he was no less mindful

of it tonight. He rejoined his men and they pretended to argue among themselves a moment and then swing off toward Indian Crossing. They reined in as soon as they were out of sight and waited for the man who had crawled up a shallow gulch near the fence to catch up with them.

BENTON was not fooled by the maneuver, nor Ryan.

"He ain't quitting," the latter declared positively when Cress had repeated what had passed between Rask and himself. "He was set to wash you out, or he's got a trick of another sort up his sleeve. While he was holding us here he may have had another bunch busting through somewhere else. We want to spread out and start riding this line." His tone was urgent.

"You take care of this end of it," Cress told him; "I'll see that they don't get through between here and the river. We don't want to let a shot or two draw us back together. If I need any help from you, I'll send for it; you do the same."

Down deep in the corner where fence and river met, Benton found the padlocked gate still intact. Triple K's line did not extend this far; Chadron owned this strip of bottom land, having bought it from Sylvain in more prosperous days. It had never been fenced off, not that that would have made any difference to Rask. In fact, it was along here that Cress felt a break-through was most likely to be attempted. He had been posting his men on the way down, and only Tiny Starbuck remained with him. The latter eyed the willow brakes along the Medicine suspiciously.

"Our ears will be more use to us than our eyes in these black shadows," he observed cautiously. "We don't have to worry about the gate; they'd have to shoot the lock off, and they won't do that. Cuttin' the wire will be easier."

They put several hundred yards between them and met every ten to fifteen minutes to exchange a word, keeping to the shadows as much as they could. An hour had passed when Tiny came hurrying back to the rendezvous.

"They're over there," he declared. "I couldn't see 'em, but I could hear their broncs snappin' off the dead limbs of the willows."

"I caught that, too," Cress told him. "A couple times, I thought. I'll move Stormy down this way a bit. If they make a rush, the three of us can hold them off long enough for Cash and the bunch to get here."

As the night wore on they had increasing evidence that there were riders just across fence. They heard them repeatedy, and just after midnight Benton got a flash of them.

"I saw some of 'em, too," Stormy reported, when next they met. "I thought it was the real thing, the way they came up to the fence. But they stopped when they was about fifty yards off and swung back." He shook his head, puzzled. "I don't get it! They know we're over here, and they ain't fools enough to think we ain't seen 'em by now. What are they waitin' for?"

"That's exactly what I'be been asking myself," said Cress. It can't be that Rask thinks we'll weary of this and pull out."

Winters was riding away again when Benton called him back.

"Stormy, you've been over here all day. Did you hear anything from up the river that sounded like action?"

"Not a thing."

"And all quiet tonight," Benton took up. "It's hard to understand."

Starbuck voiced a question that had been troubling him. "I know you lean a little toward Kinnard," he said. "I don't know but I do myself. But Rip could be the answer to this; he could be waitin' for Bill to get to him."

"I don't believe it!" Benton said flatly. "You'll find Rip playing his own hand!"

He had nothing further to say. It got to be one o'clock. Time ran on, and they neither saw nor heard anything more of Triple K. Benton was alone when he saw a ponderous shape detach itself from the black daub of the tangled willows. The

man was astride a horse that seemed *too small for him.* He sat there, head cocked, as though intent on catching the slightest sound.

Several minutes passed before Cress realized that it was Bat Chadron. He watched him intently, being careful not to disclose his presence.

BAT'S actions were suspicious; repeatedly he glanced back over his shoulder as though fearful lest he had been followed. The explanation dawned on Benton finally.

"Bat!" he called softly.

The Frenchman swung around in the direction from which the sound had come. "Benton! Where are you?" was his urgent response. "Quick!"

Cress rode up to the fence. Chadron came up close to the wire.

"I'm a damned fool or I wouldn't be doin' this," Bat protested. "I don't want to be caught here. Smiley and Durant are in my place havin' a couple drinks. Rask has pulled out with the rest of 'em and left that pair to make a little noise down here and give you the idea this is where's it's goin' to be. He knows how your bunch is spread out; he's going through above you—"

"Where?" Benton whipped out tensely.

Bat groaned. "I shouldn't be puttin' my neck out like this; . . . At the bottom of the long hill where Sylvain's old road turns north!"

Chadron didn't wait for anything further. Punching his knees into his bronc, he got away from the fence hurriedly. Cress started moving, too. In a few minutes he had picked up Tiny and Winters. It took only a sentence to acquaint them with the situation. When he reached Ryan he had better than half the crew riding with him. He was brief even with Cash. Every minute was precious now.

"They've had time enough to be coming through right now!" he declared tensely. "Let's go! We'll gather up Ross and the others on the way!"

Ryan refused to be stampeded.

"You're putting all the eggs in one basket on the word of that old renegade, Cress! This may be a sell out!"

"I'll risk it!" Benton ground out. "Things have been looking queer to me all night; only something like this would explain it!"

Riding at full strength, they swept on to the foot of the long hill. The old road that Jules Sylvain had used for years to bring his corral poles and firewood out of the Big Medicines was plainly visible in the moonlight.

"No wires been cut along here!" Ryan called out testily.

Cress saw that this was true. With doubts tearing at him he rode on. He knew that if Bat had lied to him that Triple K was already racing up the river on his range. Chadron's services had often been for sale. If Rask had got to him—

He didn't complete the thought, for as Flat Iron came abreast the hill guns flamed red on the other side of the fence. Benton knew a blessed sense of relief. He swung his men back and saw them fling their rifles to their shoulders. They returned the blast that had greeted them, and with interest.

Santell's horse was down, but he was unmarked. Ryan felt a slug whine by close to his head.

"Spread out a little!" he cried. "They're uphill a little on us! Hold below the gun flashes and break up the pattern of that shooting!"

It was good advice. It's effect was just becoming apparent when a flat-bed wagon, laden with rocks, came careening down the hill. The tongue of the wagon had been lashed down to hold the wheels in line. Straight toward the fence it plunged, bouncing into the air and spilling rocks at every bump.

CRESS realized that nothing could save the fence now. Obviously, Rask had expected to send his men through the break unopposed. That he didn't propose to be halted by Flat Iron's presence was equally plain. Ryan was barking at the men.

"Bust it up before they get

through!" he yelled. "They'll be right behind the wagon!"

Though Flat Iron was directly in the wagon's path, the men stood firm, realizing that if the impact with the fence did not check its mad flight it would certainly alter its course.

There were only seconds to wait now. Benton steeled himself for what was to come. The shooting had almost stopped; on both sides of the fence eyes were riveted on the wagon. It crashed into the wire and seemed to recoil momentarily before it tore through. The next moment it went up in the air until it stood on its nose. It fell heavily then, a shattered wreck.

Thirty yards of fence were down. Through the break Triple K came pounding, guns flaming viciously. Flat Iron met them with one withering blast after another. Two of Rask's men pitched out of their saddles. A wounded horse threw its rider. The whole charge wavered. A few turned back. But Rask had men there, seasoned gunmen like Buck Marr and the Deadwood Kid, whose business it was to fight. They tried to rally the others and slug it out. Flat Iron's guns were raking them mercilessly, however, and a minute later they were all in retreat.

Ryan dashed up to Benton. "They'll come at us again in a few minutes! We've got three men shot up. One of 'em got it pretty bad."

"Who?" Cress asked.

"Dutch. A slug just missed his windpipe. He'll be better off if we leave him right where he is till we can get him to the house. Some riderless horses over there." Cash indicated the Triple K side of the fence with a jerk of his head. Cress nodded.

"You take care of things here," he said. "I'm going up to that wagon with a couple men. You, Ross! Frosty! Pile down from your saddles and come with me! We'll hand them a little surprise the next time!"

The overturned wagon made an admirable breastwork. Flattened out behind it Benton waited for the next attack. It came quickly. This time it never reached the fence.

"We took the stinger out of that!" Ross growled. "I'll be surprised if they have another try at it!"

"You and Frosty stay here," Benton told them. "I'll be back before the moon goes down. We may have our hands full just before dawn."

He made his way back to Ryan and had a look at Dutch Schilling. Uncle Luke was there, kneeling beside the wounded man. He looked up appealingly at Benton.

"Let me go for a rig, Cress! I'll git him to town. He ain't bleedin' so bad now, but he sure needs a doctor."

"Go ahead," Benton said. "You'll find the round-up wagon at Key Spring. Tell Posie to have Dutch's blankets ready for you. When you get to the house, go in my office. You'll find a flask of whisky in the bottom drawer of my desk. Bring it back with you." He grinned at Schilling. "A shot or two on the way will keep you ticking, Dutch." He looked around him at the others. "Who else got it?"

Ryan had to name the men.

"Forget it," Stormy growled. "Dutch is the only one here who needs lookin' after."

BENTON walked aside with Cash. He said:

"I know it could have been a lot worse, but, counting McCarran, we've had four men banged up. What success we've had has cost us plenty. The night isn't over, either. It'll be pretty black when the moon drops."

Ryan nodded grimly. "Maybe they'll get a bellyful of it. I appear to have been dead wrong about Chadron. He saved our bacon. I can't help asking myself why. What stake has he got in this scrap?"

"None that I know of. He may figure his days at the Crossing are numbered unless Rask is stopped. I know if he wants a favor from Flat Iron, he'll get it."

Benton went back to the overturned wagon. The moon faded and

the pre-dawn blackness settled over the range. Not a gun flashed. The first hint of coming day was on the horizon before he was convinced that Rask had called off his men.

The light strengthened quickly. Beyond the shattered fence Triple K's range was deserted, save for a badly wounded horse.

"They picked up the men we downed," Santell muttered. "Musta been a few of 'em."

Frosty started to say something. Benton cut him off. "Ross, put that animal out of its misery," he ordered. "I can't stand seeing a horse suffer that way."

Ryan rode up a moment later. He eyed the stretch of ruined fence with a peculiar sense of outrage. "Means half a day's work!" he growled. "The wire's sagging as far as you can see; posts all loose!"

"The men are weary, Cash," Benton told him. "When we've had breakfast, some of them have got to grab a little sleep. We've got to be ready for tonight. Better patch up the fence temporarily and let it go at that. You're all in, yourself."

"I'll get things ironed out," Ryan muttered. "Got to keep this line guarded twenty-four a day for the present. I thought we'd stick here till Wiggins shows up and give him a hand with Dutch."

"How is he?" Cress asked.

Cash shook his head. "He ain't any better. Quiet over on the river again this morning. Mighty peculiar!"

Benton had no explanation to offer.

Uncle Luke had lost no time on his trip to the house. He hove in sight within the next ten minutes, keeping the team he was driving on the dead run. The men put Dutch in the wagon and made him comfortable as they could. Wiggins drove off with him at once.

Posie, Flat Iron's round-up cook, had breakfast ready when the crew reached the spring. They had no sooner eaten than Ryan sent four men back to the fence to relieve the ones he had kept there. He returned to the house himself for wire and posts, taking two wounded punchers with him. Benton went back to the fence soon after Cash had left. He found everything quiet there. When noon came, Starbuck and the others who had snatched a little sleep put in an appearance.

"I'll take over for you," Tiny told Cress. "Stormy says you haven't seen anythin' of 'em."

"No, not a thing. But don't let that fool you," Benton cautioned. "We can't count on their holding off till evening."

On the way in he found the job of repairing the fence almost completed.

"It'll do for the time being," Cash told him. "We'll finish here in another thirty minutes. These boys can turn in then for the rest of the afternoon."

BENTON went on. He was too tired to eat dinner. After a cup of coffee, he crawled under the wagon and slept. It was after five when the buzz of excited conversation awakened him.

"What is it?" he demanded anxiously.

"It's all over, Cress!" a familiar voice answered.

Blinking the sleep out of his eyes Benton saw that it was Wiggins, back from Wild Horse.

"Over?" Cress queried. "What do you mean?"

"Every dam on the river is down! Kinnard talked 'em into it without firin' a shot!"

Benton was thunderstruck. "Stop yelling," he commanded. "and let me have the facts." He scrambled to his feet.

Uncle Luke had all the details. According to his story the sheriff had got his deputies into a favorable position and then asked Greenway, the leader of the Wild Horse crowd, to meet him between the lines and talk things over. Nothing had come of it, and Kinnard had given them twenty-four hours to open the dam and disperse.

"That's what they started doin' this mornin'," Uncle Luke averred. "By noon, the river was free."

Benton still could not understand this sudden about-face. "They were all set to make a fight of it. Why did they change their minds so suddenly? What was Kinnard's argument?"

"Reckon the real argument was the scrap we had last night. They knew all about it. Kinnard didn't send for Rask. Two or three men told me that if you hadn't plugged the gap they would have had Triple K climbin' all over 'em. It musta opened their eyes."

Cress could not supply a better answer. "I suppose Rask knew how things stood—that he had to get there during the night or be too late. It certainly make things look different."

Benton started for his horse, anxious to find Cash. He turned back after a step or two. "What shape is Dutch in?" he asked.

"Doc says he'll pull him through. He's got him upstairs in a room. He'll have to keep him there a week or ten days, he told me to tell yuh. Doc had jest got back from bein' out to the Sylvain place when I showed up. He found a dead man there and three more that won't do no ridin' for a spell. Made Dutch feel better."

Ryan took the news phlegmatically. "It ought to relieve the pressure on this fence," he observed.

"It should," Benton agreed, "but we'll ride it tonight, just the same. If we squeeze through without any further trouble we'll leave a man or two here and pick up the work again."

The night passed without incident. Back home, the following morning, Cress examined the changed situation critically. He approved the decision Greenway and the others had taken.

"I offered them half a loaf," he mused. "They wouldn't take it from me. A couple days later they were willing to settle for nothing."

He had no feeling against them on that account; he realized that they were harrassed, desperate. Now that the dams were open, he did not expect the Grinnells and other old neighbors to feel any more kindly disposed toward him.

HE SHOOK his head over the thought. "Even if they did, it wouldn't be for long," he told himself. "The step I hope to take next would only turn them against me again."

A copy of the Medicine Lodge Ledger arrived at the ranch the next day. "Wild Horse Rebellion Ends," read a glaring headline. It brought home to Benton the bitter truth that though Bill Rask had lost a fight, he still had every reason to congratulate himself. District One had fallen in line, and the water steal that his father had planned, and he had carried through, was now an accomplished fact.

Cress rode into Wild Horse several days later. He wanted to see how Dutch was coming along, pick up the mail and transact some business. He found Schilling doing well. Among the letters there was one from Linscott saying he had contacted an engineer in Denver and would be at Flat Iron sometime during the coming week.

Benton met Jim Cameron on the street. They nodded as they passed. Cameron called him back then.

"That was a decent thing you did, Cress," he said. "There's no reason why I shouldn't tell you so. After what happened at your high dam there was no reason why you couldn't have looked the other way and let Rask through. You didn't owe us a favor."

"I wasn't concerned about that," Benton answered casually. "I stopped Triple K for two reasons: I hate Rask's guts, and I didn't propose to be made a party to a double-cross."

Cameron nodded. "That's still okay in my book....By the way, have you seen Cherry? She's in town."

"No," Cress said. "I don't imagine she wants to see me."

Jim hesitated, as though not knowing whether to let it go at that or not. "Maybe you better see her," he said, starting to turn away.

It left something unsaid. Benton caught him by the arm. "Why not finish it, Jim? I can take it from you, whatever it is."

Cameron shook his head. "It would be presumptuous of me to say more."

"We'll skip that," Cress got out tensely. "What is it?"

"Amy Deering gathers the social items around here for the Ledger," Jim obliged reluctantly. "When I was in the store a few minutes ago she told me that a bunch of the girls were over at Treadwell's yesterday afternoon, and that Cherry announced her engagement to Ford Harvey."

BENTON stood there, the corners of his mouth pulled down and his face rocky. "I'm obliged to you," he muttered.

He walked the street for half an hour before he saw Cherry leaving Mrs. Pine's millinery shop. He caught up with her quickly.

"Cherry—I've got to talk to you!" he declared urgently.

"I've nothing to say to you," she answered coldly, hurrying on. "I thought I'd made that plain the last time I saw you."

"You're mad to do this!" he protested, keeping step with her. "You're not in love with Ford Harvey!"

"How dare you?" Cherry answered, crimson with exasperation. "You mean no more to me than if you had never existed! When I think how close you came to killing Babe, and what you tried to do to father, I—"

"That's not fair, Cherry! You know what they were out to do to me!"

She stopped suddenly, trembling with indignation.

"I've no desire to indulge in an argument with you," she said with finality. "I'm marrying Ford Harvey. I've nothing further to say."

"All right, if that's how you want it," Cress told her. "You're free to marry whom you please. I once had the idea that I might be that man. I realize now that that would have been a mistake. . . I hope you and Ford will be happy."

He raised his hat, and Cherry continued on her way, proud and furious.

Benton returned to the ranch in a brooding silence. Now that he had lost Cherry Grinnell he realized for the first time how much she had meant to him. Knowing something of the stubbornness of the Grinnells, he knew she would go through with her plans.

"At least, Ford will make her a good husband," he admitted to himself. "And the Harveys have money. I hope it isn't a long engagement; I don't want her to regret what she's doing."

He had his wish fulfilled sooner than he expected. He was still waiting for Linscott to show up when he read in the Ledger that Ford and Cherry had been married and were spending their honeymoon in Denver.

Ryan sat back in the shadows and watched Cress pacing up and down the gallery that evening. He knew what was troubling him.

"I wouldn't take this too hard," he said at last, the rough edges of his voice softened with sympathy. "Sometimes these things happen for the best."

"So I've heard," was Benton's bleak answer. "It closes another door on the past. That's what I want; I suppose I should be happy about it. I've often had the feeling that when the old man passed on that the old days and old ways were gone forever. This is just one more proof of it."

"Your father's ways were good ways," Ryan declared stoutly. "You'll be hard put to produce anything better."

"I know it," Cress muttered. "If I don't, it won't be for lack of trying."

CHAPTER VII

High Stakes

IT WAS late in the evening when Alva Linscott, accompanied by the engineer from

Denver, a man by the name of Hethrington, arrived at the ranch.

"I know so little about what's on your mind, Cress," Linscott declared, "that I haven't been able to give Hethrington any more than the haziest idea of what you want of him. He's had a long, hard trip up here; I know he's tired. I was going to suggest that we get a good night's sleep and go into things in the morning."

"Certainly," Benton agreed. "Morning will be time enough. I wouldn't mind talking to you for a few minutes, Alva. We needn't keep Mr. Hethrington up."

Old Curly had brought the bags from the rig. He stood in the doorway, all ears. Cress told him to show the engineer upstairs to his room.

"I hate to confess that I'm getting old," Hethrington remarked with a laugh, "but fourteen hours in a day-coach has made me ready for bed. If you don' mind—"

"Not at all," Cress assured him. "We'll have some riding to do in the morning. We'll take a pack animal with us. It'll mean a blanket and a soft place on the ground tomorrow night."

They said good night, and Linscott followed Benton into the office. The lawyer produced his pipe and settled down in a chair. "That was quite a licking you gave Bill," he observed. "A lot of people seemed pleased in the Lodge. Not that they said so openly; but you can tell. Bill Rask hasn't endeared himself to anyone by his high-handed tactics. Old Morgan was a lot smoother about his grabbing.... Have you figured out his next move?"

"Not beyond what he'll do when some of the outfits along the Medicine begin to feel the pinch. That shouldn't be for some months. He's got the cash to buy them up when the price drops. Now that Triple K has all the water it needs down below, Rash can squeeze a profit out of a place like the Quarter Circle where Grinnell would go broke. It would be simply a case of using that range in the spring and early summer and then moving his stuff below for the fall."

Linscott nodded. "If I know him, he won't overlook it. He'll have another string to his bow, too. He can't crowd you off, Cress, but he can move in around you. That was always his father's first move when he wanted something. . . Was it this that you wanted to speak to me about?"

"Only indirectly. I can't hope to keep my moves secret very long. But maybe I can get a little jump on him. I certainly don't intend to sit back and wait for the plums to drop into his basket. I can't drag him down if I play such a game." Benton paused for a moment. "You know Wolf Lake. You've shot ducks up there a good many times in the fall."

"Certainly," Linscott murmured.

"I'm going to try to bring that water down here," Cress declared simply. "That's why I wanted an engineer to look it over."

LINSCOTT popped erect in his chair. "That's certainly an ambitious undertaking," he said skeptically. "It will cost a fortune!"

"I don't care how much it costs if it'll pay off. I believe I can get some help as far as the expense goes. What I want you to tell me tonight, Alva, is this: by any stretch of the imagination, can the interests that Rask represents accuse me of diverting water from the Medicine River watershed if I attempt to do anything with that lake?"

"I don't believe so. I don't like to give you any snap judgment on a matter as important as that, but the run-off from Wolf Lake travels away from Medicine. I suppose there is some seepage that would be stopped if you drained the lake. But that isn't your intention."

"Hardly," Benton asserted. "If any action developed against me wouldn't it be decided on the testimony of an expert engineer like Hethrington?"

Linscott smiled. "You had both barrels loaded, didn't you? I'd say that Hethrington's opinion would

qualify as expert opinion. If he says you're all right, I'd take his word for it. There's no better man in the Rocky Mountain states; I made sure of that. One thing will need some looking into, though. A search of the records will be necessary. I know that Jim Cameron's father used to use that little stream that flows out of the lake and finally winds up out on the Colorado Desert. Split Rock Creek he called it."

"That's the only name I ever heard for it," Benton said. "This is worth looking into. I want you to be sure and do it. I think you'll find that Eli Cameron never had any legal right to the water. As far as I know, all that high, broken country beyond the lake is still in the public domain."

"If that's the case, you can buy some of it and file on the creek."

Cress said no. "I wouldn't move it on Jim like that. I don't believe I'll have any trouble with him over it. I know I'm going to need him before I get through."

He did not offer to enlarge on that end of it, and their conversation turned to other matters. Half an hour later, as they were going up the stairs, Linscott said:

"Does your crew know what you're up to?"

"Cash does," Cress answered with a smile. "If the rest don't, seeing you and Hethrington here will certainly put some ideas in their minds."

They were up early. At breakfast Benton told the engineer of his plans.

"What I particularly want to know is this: can it be done, how long will it take and how much will it cost."

Hethrington laughed. "Water still flows downhill, so I suppose it can be done. As for the rest, we won't know much about that until we get some men up there with a transit and run some levels."

Old Curly, bursting with curiosity, hovered around them as they were preparing to leave. Ryan finally dispatched him on an errand that took him down the yard, sputtering with annoyance.

Once past the broken butte it was a stiff climb all the way to the Stepping Stone Peaks. Hethrington made some sketches and diagrams in his field book when they got there.

"It is plain enough to me that any moisture that falls beyond these peaks never finds its way into Medicine River," he said. "We are standing right now on the extreme limits of that watershed. Give me the direction of the lake from here."

BENTON pointed it out to him. "In a bee-line, it can't be two miles," he explained. "We'll have to travel three or four times that distance to reach it unless you gentlemen are prepared to do some rough riding. You can see that it's a tangle of deep canyons and spots of mountain meadow."

"We'll swing around the easy way," Linscott said definitely. "It's not so bad when you follow the ridge. It will save us time in the end, Hethrington. I got lost down in those canyons once. Cress's father had to send a couple men out to find me."

These high mountains were well timbered, the virgin growth forming an emerald rim for the lake. The three men were within several hundred yards of it before they got their first glimpse of its wind ruffled blue waters sparkling in the sun.

"It's a beautiful spot," Linscott declared. "I never saw anything up in Glacier any prettier."

At Hethrington's request they circled around the lake until they reached the outlet. He studied the high water mark made when the spring run-off was at its height.

"It would be a simple matter to raise the level of the lake by damming up this creek," he said. "If you're going to use this water there's no reason why any of it should go to waste."

"None at all," Cress concurred. "Not much flowing out now, but between the time the ice breaks up and the middle of June the creek is bank full." He looked at his watch. "It's three o'clock," he said. "We've four hours of daylight left. We'll camp here on the shore of the lake tonight. Suppose we leave Alva to do some

fishing and you and I can do a little exploring."

"That's what we're here for," the engineer told him. He gazed at the frowning mountain wall that stood between them and the headwaters of Medicine River. "We can't take water over or under that barrier. Is it possible that you've found a way to get around it?"

"I think so," Benton answered. "I know a little tunnelling and some blasting will have to be done. How much, it will be up to you to say."

"Be back before dark!" Linscott called as they started off. "I'll have a nice mess of rainbows ready for the pan!"

Benton took Hethrington halfway around the lake before he began picking his way down an unpromising canyon. It ended abruptly in the course of a quarter of a mile.

"Don't let this discourage you," Cress said. "I've been going over this country for three or four years with the idea in mind that we might use Wolf Lake some day. This hogback ahead of us will have to be blown out, or a short tunnel put through. You'll find the country looks pretty good on the other side."

They sent their mounts over the barrier and found themselves in a long, steep canyon that ran to the west.

"There's plenty of pitch to this for our purpose," Hethrington conceded.

They followed the canyon some distance before it began to describe a long half circle. It seemed to be heading toward a sharp cleft in the mountains.

"When we get there we'll be beyond the crest," Cress explained. "We'll actually be west of the peaks."

ONCE through the sharp defile they found three possible courses ahead of them. Benton chose the canyon at the right. They were about to ride into it when something broke through the brush ahead of them. The horses reared, and Cress reached for his rifle.

"What was that—a deer?" Hethrington demanded tensely.

"That was a horse! Somebody spying on us! You wait here; I'm going after him!"

With the snapping of brush to direct him Benton took after the rider they had flushed so unexpectedly. He hung on for ten minutes without catching sight of the man. His own horse was making so much noise as it charged through the brush that it was not until a shower of loose rock from above fell about him that he realized his quarry had climbed out of the canyon.

Benton knew the man would have to expose himself on the rim for a moment. He trained his rifle on the spot, and when he got a distant glimpse of the scurrying horseman, he snapped a shot at him.

Cress had time to think it over on his way back to Hethrington. "He scared easily enough, but that's no reason for taking this lightly," he muttered in tight-lipped seriousness. "If my steps are being dogged that way, I better take a lesson from it."

"Was that your shot I heard?" the engineer asked.

"Yeh, I hurried him on his way when he scrambled over the rim. It never crossed my mind that we didn't have this country to ourselves. Evidently someone got curious about your being here. I suppose you and Linscott had dinner at the hotel in Wild Horse."

"Yes, but we weren't advertising our business."

"I didn't mean that," Benton assured him. "A word would have been enough. The walls have long ears in that town lately. Shall we go on?"

At the end of another mile they had proceeded far enough to convince the engineer they could break through into the valley of the Medicine.

"It can be done," he said, "and as such things go, at moderate cost. From what I've seen this afternoon, I'd say the job could be completed before snow falls. We can make the preliminary survey in ten days to two weeks."

"Go ahead with it," Benton told him. "Send for the men you'll need as soon as we get back to the house. I imagine we better turn around.

Linscott will be wondering what's happened to us."

John Hethrington cast a wary glance at the underbrush as they started back to the lake. "Linscott has told me something about how matters stand in this county," he remarked soberly. "If I undertake this project am I apt to be opposed? I mean armed violence, Benton."

"That's likely to be the case," Cress was compelled to admit. "I'll see that you have all the protection you need."

Hethrington was not impressed by that promise. "I know you mean it," he said, "but protection hardly covers the case. I've been through situations like this before. It usually means some smashed equipment and a lot of time lost."

"I'll take the responsibility for that," Benton assured him. "I'm hiring you to do a job, not to take up my fight."

"I've never been able to separate them in my business," the engineer returned; "one goes with the other. I've built my organization on that principle. If a man won't fight for the job he's on, he can't work for me. Once I start on this work, I'll see it through. I mentioned the matter only because I want you to understand why it won't be possible for me to give you a definite date for completing the contract. I can only promise to do the best I can."

"That's good for me," Cress stated. "Under the circumstances I couldn't pin you down." He found himself liking Hethrington better the longer he knew him. The man's frankness and aggressiveness appealed to him.

IT WAS after dark when they reached the lake. Linscott had a fire going and the camp made comfortable. He looked them over carefully when they rode in.

"I thought I heard a shot fired this afternoon," he said.

"Yeh, I fired it," Benton replied.

"Somebody's curious about what we're doing up here." He gave the lawyer an account of what had happened.

Linscott was not inclined to take it seriously. "Must have been one of those kids from Wild Horse. I noticed young Grinnell hanging around the Morgan House."

Benton was not convinced that this was the correct answer, but he pretended to accept it. He sniffed appreciatively at the appetizing odors arising from the fire, where Linscott had a nice mess of trout browning and a pot of coffee coming to the boil.

"Hethrington and I will do justice to those fish," he exclaimed. "They look fine, Alva!"

"Well, get ready, and I'll dish things up," the lawyer urged. "I've got some biscuits in the Dutch oven."

Alva had every right to pride himself on his cooking. When they had eaten their fill, they sat around, with the pleasant aroma of tobacco smoke rising from their pipes. The scene was so peaceful and the company so good that Benton found himself enjoying the first real relaxation he had known in days. And yet, after the others were sound asleep, he put out the fire and reconnoitered the ground around the camp for several hundred yards. When he turned in, he slipped his gun under his blanket.

Nothing happened to disburb the serenity of the night, however. Linscott was up early and stole away down the rocky shore with his rod. He was back in short order, holding up a four-pound rainbow.

"Some real tackle-busters in this lake!" he declared enthusiastically. "You put the camp stuff together and I'll rustle up some breakfast."

They returned by way of the peaks. Benton studied the ground there carefully and discovered the fresh tracks of a shod horse leading off to the west.

"Just what I thought!" he declared soberly. "The bird we flushed yesterday didn't come from Wild Horse!"

"One of Bill Rask's men, you think?" Linscott queried.

"I'd stake my life on it."

"I'm not so sure about that," Alva demurred. "If he knew we were coming up here, he certainly must have known why. It wouldn't have

been necessary for him to have a man follow us to find out."

"He didn't know, I'm sure," Cress countered. "He's been having the Flat Iron house watched. When we pulled out, his spy trailed along with us. It means we've got to move quickly now, or find that we're too late. I want you to get back to Lodge at once, Alva. Get the information on Split Rock Creek as quickly as you can. I'll be in Wild Horse waiting for a telegram from you. I'll see Jim Cameron then and be in your office the next day. I'm going to buy all that land along the creek."

"There's a lot of it, Cress," Linscott reminded him. "Even at a dollar and a quarter an acre it will mean tying up seven to eight thousand dollars."

"I'll do it if it costs twice that much," was Benton's stony answer. "My worry now is to get there before Bill Rask grabs it!"

CHAPTER VIII

Cards On the Table

BENTON parted with Hethrington and Linscott at the peaks and followed the trail of the unknown rider. It was easy to read. Night had fallen before the man had got back this far. Evidently aware that he was not being pursued, he had taken his time. The tracks proved that.

Cress reached a rocky point where the intruder had reined up for a few minutes. The broken butt of a brown paper cigarette caught his eye. It seemed too vague a clue to mean anything. The trail led on, keeping to the high places and always heading for Jules Sylvain's old range.

Benton lost it once, but when he picked it up again, it carried him to a break in the Flat Iron fence. He examined the two strands of wire that had been cut before he repaired them. There was blood in his eye when he reached the house.

Linscott and Hethrington had long since left for town, Alva to take the evening train to Medicine Lodge and the latter to get off a telegram to Denver and then return to the ranch. Cress summoned Ryan to the house at once.

"I guess you can blame me for it," Cash declared grimly when he had heard the news. "I know Rask has gone back to the Lodge and left Buck Marr to run that spread. I just didn't believe he had the guts to put a man on our range to spy on us."

"It's no more your fault than mine," Cress told him. "I didn't give it a thought, either. Now that we know, we can put a stop to it. The work has slacked off so that we can spare a couple men to ride those hills. Make it plain to the crew that any Triple K rider, or anyone else found on our range who can't give a satisfactory explanation of his presence, gets a dose of lead! I mean to be tough about it; just running them off won't do."

"That suits me fine," Ryan growled. He saw Ross riding up to the office. "You send for Santell?" he asked.

"Yeh, I spoke to him when I passed the corrals. I'm going to the Crossing; he's going with me."

"I approve of that," said Cash. "I'd like it even better if you took three or four of the boys along. When Roberts came in from the fence this morning he told me that that bunch of coyotes are hanging out at Bat's place. You may run into more'n you can handle."

"I hope I run into Buck Marr," was Benton's flinty answer. "I'll at least get word to him that the next man he sends over here is a dead man."

On the way to the Crossing Cress and Santell met up with the first of two riders Ryan had patrolling the fence. Benton repeated the order he had just given Cash. At the scene of the fight they encountered Stormy Winters. His reaction to the announcement that henceforth it was to be a case of shoot first and ask questions later was characteristic.

"I'm glad it's official now," he chirped. "I been workin' along those lines ever since this ruckus started."

Stormy grinned shamelessly. "I sure hope I run into one of them sidewinders! I'll bring yuh his ears!"

"That's what I'll expect you to do," Benton answered as he and Ross rode on.

They were still several hundred yards from Bat's door when they saw three horses racked there. They came on easily.

"Triple K broncs," Ross muttered, reading the brands. "Three shouldn't be too many."

Benton glanced at the front window, thinking how easy it would be for the men inside to pick them off as they rode up. "Swing in close when you reach the corner of the building," he advised. "Be right behind me when I hit the door."

They slid out of their saddles and crossed the porch quickly. The door stood open, as usual. Cress walked in out of the bright sunshine and rifled a glance around the room. Buck Marr and Durant stood at the bar. In a chair tilted back against the wall sat Ferd Smiley. Bat was behind the bar.

IT WAS quiet enough now, but there were little signs that told Benton and Santell had stepped into an unfinished argument. Smiley's disinterestedness was a painful sham. The harried look in Chadron's round little eyes was genuine enough.

There was no mirror behind the bar. Marr and Durant half turned away from their unfinished drinks and fastened their eyes on Benton and Santell. Cress walked up to within three or four feet of where they stood. Ross moved up beside him, his easy-going, unruffled manner as spurious as Ferd Smiley's pretended detachment.

"I hoped I'd find you here," Cress said to Marr. "It gives me a chance to tell you to your teeth that the next man you send spying on Flat Iron will be killed on sight. We'll be looking for him."

Buck chose not to understand. To show his contempt for this plain talk Chip Durant flipped a cigarette into shape with extravagant nonchalance. It happened to be a brown paper he used. Not too uncommon, but Benton made a note of it.

"It's news to me that I've had some of my boys tailin' you, Benton. I was put on this new spread to iron it out and make it show a profit. I've got more important matters on my hands than carin' a hoot about what you're doin'."

"Don't waste your breath on that line of talk with me," Benton rapped. "I can follow a trail, and I know when nippers have been used on barbed wire."

Such cunning as there was in Buck Marr was quickly submerged by the rising tide of his wrath. His lips lifted from his teeth in a threatening smirk. "You haven't got a friend left to your name, yet you find some horse tracks or cut wire and try to throw it in my face! I'm warnin' you to back up, Benton! You're gettin' too big for your boots!"

"So what?" Cress queried quietly.

The very mildness of the challenge seemed to pump an electric tension into the air. Bat had not moved a finger. Ferd Smiley continued his pretense of reading the old newspaper spread out on his lap. Santell noticed these things as he waited, his right arm hanging free at his side. He was not overawed by the fact that Durant and Smiley bore the reputation of being Triple K's most expert and ruthless gunslicks. For years Morgan Rask had used them to convince whoever got in his way that the game was not worth the candle. The old man had passed Buck Marr by unnoticed, but Marr's participation in the slaying of Ki Benton had apparently won him his spurs with Bill.

"Another crack out of you and I'll show you what!" Buck lashed back, as intent on establishing his authority over Durant and Ferd as in standing up to Cress. "Your belly-ache is a lot of damned nonsense as far as I'm concerned! Identify the man I'm supposed to have had tailin' you, if you can!"

Chip Durant jerked the cigarette from his mouth, broke it between thumb and forefinger and hurled it

to the floor angrily. "What's the idea?" he snarled. "How much more yuh goin' to take from this gent, Buck?"

"Shut up!" Marr snapped. "I'll handle this!"

Benton's gray eyes wrinkled in a thin, frosty smile. He had known other men who had acquired the habit of breaking their cigarettes before tossing them away, but there wasn't any doubt in his mind but what it was Durant whom he had chased out of the canyon below Wolf Lake. He said:

"You stepped in over your head that time, Marr. Durant doesn't seem to appreciate your cleverness. He knows he wouldn't be here now if the light had been a little better when I slapped that shot at him last evening."

"The hell you say!" Buck roared. "Where's your evidence?"

"There on the floor—that broken cigarette butt. I trailed him by the ones I picked up."

BENTON knew this argument had reached its climax. He had forced it, and he was determined that Buck Marr would either fight or crawl.

Santell was equally aware that the deciding moment had come. He and Cress could only wait. Not so, big Bat. The little eyes peeping over their rolls of fat gave no indication of the fact that he had reached a decision, too. Unnoticed, his hand dropped below the bar to a little shelf. His fingers closed on a heavy forty-five. A split second later his loaded fist slapped the surface of the bar. Some of the slack had gone out of his sagging cheeks and he was a forbidding figure as he stood there with his gun leveled—not at Buck Marr and Durant, but at Ferd Smiley.

"Better not try it, Ferd," he said with a throaty rasp. "This dump's got a rotten reputation, but we don't shoot 'em in the back here....Let that newspaper slide to the floor, and no tricks with the hands." It caught Smiley in the act of drawing.

Marr whirled on Bat fiercely. "Why, damn your rotten hide!" he raged. "You keep your nose outa this, Chadron! I smelled a rat the other night, and I get the smell again! I'm beginnin' to understand where Benton gets his information!"

"Carry your fight outside," Bat told him. "That's as far as my interest goes." He could have let it go at that. There were several reasons why he didn't. He once had been a bad man to step on. Partly because those old fires were not completely dead in him, and partly because Marr had come there to deliver an ultimatum regarding the future ownership of this strip of land, but principally because he knew he was over his head already, he added with stinging contempt. "Or mebbe it ain't a fight you gents are lookin' for."

Buck Marr could have slain him where he stood for it. "You asked for it!" he snarled. "Don't be surprised if somebody touches a match to this shack one of these nights!"

He started for the door. Smiley and Durant fell in behind him.

"One good turn deserves another, Bat," Benton said loud enough for their ears. "I heard that threat to burn you out. I'll remember it—just in case."

The three men rode off, roweling their broncs.

"The same streak of yellow in them that you find in all blacklegs," Cress observed coolly. "That was nice work, Bat. I'm sorry you didn't let Smiley have it. It would have been one less skunk in the world." Chadron shook his head gravely.

"I played tough; but it don't mean a thing. I know the jig is up with me; I won't be here long. Bill's given me the choice of sellin' out to him for what I paid Sylvain, or bein' run off. This settles it for keeps."

"Don't let go of this land," Benton said flatly. "Hold on to it for another year and it'll be worth twenty times what Rask will give you. If they pull the building on you, go into Wild Horse and sit there for a few months. I'm not answering any questions, but between the two

of us, some changes are going to hit this country."

Bat gulped down his surprise and thought over what Cress had told him. "Bill's got my answer," he muttered; "I ain't sellin'." He poured a drink for the two men and himself. He sighed heavily as he studied the brimming glass. "To think that men like that can push folks around! I wish I could turn the clock back about fifteen years just for a day or two. Fish like that used to leave town when I rode in."

"It's a new variety we're dealing with today, Bat," Santell remarked. "They come out of their holes and snap at you when you ain't looking. I wonder who Marr thought he was fooling when he was sounding off about making that ranch show a profit. If it was a profit Rask was looking for he wouldn't have put Buck in charge. You can bet your life that wasn't Brad Mulhall's doing. Say what you will about him, Brad's a cowman, at least."

THEY tossed off their drink.

"Have they moved any stock in?" Cress asked.

"Yeh, a lot of stuff from their western ranches," Bat answered. "And a hell of a time they're havin' with it. Old Jules always kept his stuff away from what he called Poison Crick. He thought there was somethin' wrong with the water—he used to lose cattle every time they got in there. He really never knew what the trouble was. Your old man had a look at some of them once. He told Jules it was arsenic poisonin'—that they'd eat somethin'. Mebbe wild parsnips."

Benton nodded. "I remember. Is that what Marr's walked into?"

"He's lost about thirty cows already. He don't know what to do, so he's sent down the river for Mulhall." Bat spun his gun on his finger and replaced it on the shelf. "Too damn bad that sickness don't wipe out a few of them two-legged skunks while it's about it.... You leavin' so soon?"

"I've got to be in town in the morning," Cress answered. "You go easy on the bottle, Bat. If they catch you well plastered, you won't have a chance."

Benton was in Wild Horse before noon. There was no word from Linscott as yet. While he was waiting, Cress dropped in to see Dutch and found him about ready to return to the ranch.

"One of the boys will be in with a rig tomorrow or the next day to pick up a couple men," he told him. "You can go out with them."

"New hands?" Dutch queried.

"No, some surveyors who are going out to do some work for me."

The telegram from Alva did not arrive until early in the afternoon. It confirmed Benton's opinion that the Camerons had never filed on Split Rock Creek. But it was so late now that he could not make the long ride to the Little Medicine and return to town in time to catch the evening train west.

"I'll see Jim this afternoon and put up at the hotel over night," he decided. "That'll put me in the Lodge early tomorrow morning."

Riding out of Wild Horse, he passed Reb Grinnell. Reb refused to answer his greeting. It made Cress realize afresh that the grudges against him were deep and that every move he made would be viewed with suspicion by his old neighbors. That was less true of Cameron than of anyone else, but whether Jim would listen to the proposition to be put before him this afternoon with an open mind was a question.

Cameron was at the forge, doing some blacksmithing, when Benton rode into the Box C yard. "I didn't expect to see you up here, Cress," he said. "I thought you had your hands full on Flat Iron."

Benton grinned. "I seem to have that trouble under control. There's something I want to talk over with you, Jim It may take your breath away when you first hear it, but I want you to think it over before you say yes or no."

They walked up to the house and sat down on the kitchen steps.

"I remember your saying to me

that night at the meeting—the last one I attended—that you thought I was taking the right stand, but you couldn't afford to string along with me," Cress began. "It wasn't the water you were concerned about chiefly, was it?"

"No, it wasn't. I suppose the two of us will be affected by the changed conditions on the river less than anyone. Between the Little Medicine and a couple feeder creeks, my water supply is pretty steady. I never saw the need of putting up a dam. When I told you I couldn't afford to play it your way, I was thinking of the fact that I intend to go on living here; that Tom Greenway, Steve Hoffman and the rest are my friends. Even though I thought they were wrong, I didn't see how I could throw them overboard. I don't suppose it makes sense, but that's how I felt."

Benton nodded. "That's about what I thought was in your mind. Those things occurred to me, too."

"Thank God, you had the courage of your convictions, Cress! You haven't anything to regret. If we'd had the backing of Flat Iron, this fight would be going on still, and putting us deeper and deeper into a hole. I know if I had it to do over again my answer would be different ....Why do you bring it up?"

"BECAUSE I'm going to ask you to do something that every cowman in this district will oppose. It will save them in the end, and I don't believe anything else will, but they won't see it that way at first. We'll be accused of trying to feather our own nests. It'll take nerve and determination to see it through, Jim. With your help, I can't fail. But my mind's made up on it; if I have to go it alone again, I'm prepared to do it. I'll put my cards on the table....I'm going to bring water from Wolf Lake down to Medicine Valley. I've had an engineer from Denver looking it over. He tells me it can be done. He's starting the preliminary survey in a day or two."

"Do you need water that bad?" Cameron asked when he had finished expressing his surprise. The incredulous look that had settled on his lean, tanned face, deepened as he thought of the staggering cost of such a move.

"I don't need it for Flat Iron," said Cress. "I know neither you nor your father have used Split Rock Creek for years. I had a telegram from Alva Linscott this afternoon telling me no one has ever filed on it. I'm going to the Lodge in the morning and buy in all that worthless land just to make sure that, once started, I won't run into a lawsuit with anyone. I'll raise the level of the lake three to four feet. By October the whole job can be completed.

Cameron shook his head, sorely puzzled.

"Where do I fit into this? I haven't any money to invest, Cress."

"I don't want a dime from you. I'll take care of the money end, along with the help I know I can get from the Wyoming and Western. I'm bringing that water down to start an irrigation district and pipe it across the river and sell it to any man who wants it."

"Irrigation district?" Jim sat up stiffly. "Does that mean you're bringing in farmers—turning your flat-lands over to the plow?"

"That's exactly my intention! Between us we can settle three hundred families in this part of the country. Small farms and big families! Men and women and grown sons and daughters old enough to vote! With that many people moving in, Wild Horse will pick up. We can put an end to this government and taxation without representation that Medicine Lodge has crammed down our throats for years!"

"You're taking my breath away, just as you warned," Cameron declared. He sighed to himself. "It's at least a wonderful dream!"

"It may be just a dream now, but we can make it a reality within twelve months," Benton insisted grimly. "The railroad will leap at the chance to bring people in. There isn't a business man in Wild Horse

who won't benefit by it. And we don't have to waste any time wondering how long it will be before the western half of Box Elder tries the same method to keep us under its thumb. They haven't the water there, and there's no chance of their getting it. You know it won't pinch Box C and Flat Iron to pull back from the flat-lands. We can get twenty-five to thirty dollars an acre for that land. We'll still have all the range we need, and a sure supply of water to go with it."

Cameron smiled at Benton's earnestness. "Cress, you're talking around the one sore point in this scheme. You know that we'd only have to say irrigation to have every stockman between here and the Crossing up in arms."

"Until they realize that this is the only thing that can save them. How long can Reb Grinnell hang on to Quarter Circle with no water after June fiifteenth? How about Greenway? Steve Hoffman? I can name a dozen who'll lose their places if things go on as they are. They'll see Bill Rask gobble them up at his own price. Reb could sell a couple hundred acres of bottom land and tide himself over. When he needs water next summer, he can buy it—and the price will be just what it costs to bring it down."

Cress repeated the argument he had tried out on Santell the day they had ridden down from the fence to the Crossing. When he finished, Cameron was silent.

The supper bell rang as they sat there.

"You go on in and eat," Jim said. "I'm going to walk down to the corrals and think this over."

Box C had a six-man crew. Benton knew them by sight and they recognized him. They ate hurriedly, that being their habit, and filed out before Cress had finished. He was drinking a second cup of coffee when Cameron came in. There was an enormous sobriety about him.

"I've fought this out with myself," Jim said, standing at the table. "I know it will bring more trouble, but for better or worse, I'm with you. It may be the hard way. In fact, I'm sure it is; we'll be abused and misunderstood by the very ones who should be cheering the loudest for us."

Cress nodded. "I've had a taste of that already.

"I know it," Jim said. "If you can stand it, I guess I can."

CHAPTER IX

The Taste of Blood

WHEN Benton stepped off the train in Medicine Lodge the next morning he went to Linscott's office at once. It was the first time he had been in the county seat since the day his father had been killed. Being back here stirred memories in him that stamped bitter lines on his face.

"A couple months have brought some changes," he said to himself, "and it's only the beginning. I'll put the skids under this town before I'm through."

He found Alva waiting for him and betraying distinct signs of uneasiness. Even the news Cress was able to give him concerning Cameron's decision was not enough to dispel the lawyer's preoccupation.

"What is it, Alva?" Benton asked. "Has something gone wrong?"

"I don't know," was the honest answer. "It may be just a coincidence. There's a sign on the Land Office door this morning saying Patton has been called out of town on business and won't be back till this afternoon. You know Gib Patton, the deputy U. S. agent. His piddling job just fits him. Like a good many others around here he's at Bill Rask's beck and call. I can't shake off the feeling that he ducked out of town in order to give Bill a chance to make up his mind about what he wants to do on the very matter that's brought you to the Lodge."

"There must be more to it than that to upset you like this," said Cress, holding himself in check.

"Well, you know the courthouse is full of worms who owe their jobs to the Rask political setup. You can't go in and ask for a record without somebody being curious about your business. I felt it yesterday morning when I asked for the file on Split Rock Creek. I know that Rask was informed of my business there before I got back here to my office. Were you able to get a line on who it was spying on us at the lake?"

"It was Chip Durant, one of Rask's blacklegs."

Benton recounted for him what had happened at the Crossing.

"That doesn't make the situation look any better," Linscott declared heavily. "If Buck Marr sent Durant up there it was done on Bill's orders. You can bet that word about what Durant found out got to headquarters in a hurry. I'd say he knows enough by now to have a pretty good idea of what you're up to."

"Just how, Alva?" Cress countered. "He knows I was up there with you and Hethrington. Isn't that about all?"

"He knows the two of you were exploring those canyons below the lake. He knows I've had a look at the records on Split Rock Creek. Bill Rask may not be the brightest man in the world, but he ought to be able to put that together. If he was in any doubt of it he must have got the answer when you got off the train a few minutes ago."

Benton was impressed, but not convinced.

"If Rask had this business sized up as correctly as all that, he'd have beat me to it and bought that land. He's had time enough."

"Sure he has," Linscott agreed, "but he isn't saddling himself with seven to eight thousand dollars worth of mountainside unless he has to. When it comes to not throwing money away, he's old Morg's son ....Did you bring some cash with you?"

"I've got a cashier's check for ten thousand on the Wild Horse National. I don't suppose there's any use haunting the Land Office if there's no one there."

"No, that's a good place to keep away from. Have you got anything to do over here that might look like business?"

"I thought I'd drop in and see the division superintendent of the railroad. I know I'll have to go down to Cheyenne to see the right man as soon as Hethrington gives me some figures. I thought Coombs might give me a letter to him."

"Go ahead," the lawyer urged. "Just don't say too much. After dinner we'll drop over to the courthouse and do a little wrangling with the county assessor. Patton's office is just across the hall. When he shows up, we'll get to him before anyone else does."

THEY had been in the assessor's office, keeping a profitless argument alive for over an hour, when they saw Gib Patton unlock his door. It was after half-past two.

"Customers?" Patton, a mousy-looking little man, queried in a faint attempt at a jest as they walked in.

"Get out your map and section chart covering the northeast corner of this county," Linscott told him.

"That will be Wolf Lake—or just a little east of the lake," Patton stated. "Your boundary runs north and south there, Mr. Benton."

"That's right," Cress replied. "There's twelve sections in that corner of the county that I want. You don't have to bother showing me a topographical map; the U. S. Survey will do."

The agent opened a large safe and got out the map and chart. Though his forehead was damp with perspiration when he deposited them on the counter, he walked over to the open window and closed it. The idea popped into Benton's mind that it was a signal to someone watching below.

"It's pretty warm in here to be closing windows," he said. Without waiting for Patton's answer he walked to the closed window and glanced below in time to see Bill

Rask crossing the street in the direction of the courthouse.

"I—I'm sorry," Patton apologized. "I didn't think—"

"You want to begin to think in a hurry," Benton whipped out thinly. "Where's your map?"

"Why, here, Mr. Benton—"

"That's right!" Cress tapped off the twelve sections with his finger. "What's the price?"

"A dollar and ten cents an acre. But I'll have to be sure they are free before I can sell them to you."

"You know they're free, Patton!" Linscott exclaimed with rising ire.

"Of course, he does!" Benton exploded. He reached across the counter and grabbed the agent by the collar. "You miserable little double-crosser, quit your stalling! Rask will be here in a minute; he got your signal! You start making out a deed to me or I'll tear you apart!"

"The window?" asked Linscott.

"Yeh!" Cress gritted. "They had it rigged to beat us, just as you figgered. But it will be first come, first served, or I'll know why! Get your blanks, Patton, and start writing!"

The agent began to fill out the deed and transfer. Benton braced himself as he heard someone run up the stairs. The door was pushed open a moment later and Bill Rask strode in, puffing for breath. Ignoring Cress and Linscott, he pused up to the counter.

"Just a minute, Gib!" he roared. "If these men are here to buy that land east of Wolf Lake, you can't do business with them! I told you last night I'd buy it, and I'm here to exercise my option!"

"Option?" Alva jeered. "There's no such thing as an option in a U. S. land office! I know the law!"

"Do you?" Bill flung back triumphantly, seeing the check Cress held in his hand. He glanced at the clock on the wall. The time was ten minutes to three. "I'll tell you how one part of the law reads: 'Payment to be made in the currency of the United States!' A bank check or draft won't do, Linscott! If Patton takes it, I'll have this sale set aside, and you damned well know I can do it!"

Linscott knew Rask was right. He glanced at the moving hands of the clock. He had lost the water fight to big Bill, but he didn't intend to lose this argument if a bluff would save the day.

"That's perfectly okay with us," he declared, producing his wallet. "A bank check is the equivalent of cash, but if Patton insists on currency, he can have it. I'll take care of that. You go ahead and make out the papers," he told the agent. "The money is right here."

RASK was not prepared for this maneuver. His eyes were murderous as he glared at Linscott. He knew he was being taken. The lawyer had money, but he was not in habit of carrying eighty-five hundred dollars in cash around with him.

"I want to see you pay off!" he growled. "I'll be right here to call that bluff!"

Alva caught Cress's eye. "You've got nine minutes to get to the bank if you want to turn that piece of paper in your hand into cash today," he remarked casually. "You'll have to hurry."

Benton didn't wait to answer. He ran down the stairs and across the street to the bank. He was well known there, but the size of the check he presented brought the president of the institution to the teller's window.

"It's within a few minutes of closing, Mr. Benton," the banker told him. "We'll honor the draft, of course, but it will take a minute or two to open the vault."

"It doesn't want to take any longer than that!" Cress rapped. "I need this money in a hurry!"

Across the street in Patton's office Alva Linscott's nerve was being put to the test. Five minutes had elapsed since Cress had run down the stairs. Patton was scribbling hurriedly now, with Rask standing there watching every scratch of the pen.

"There is it," the agent said finally. "Twelve sections at one-ten an

acre comes to eight thousand, four hundred and forty-eight dollars."

"The amount is correct," Linscott agreed, wondering if Benton would ever come. "I'll have a look at the papers before I pay you." He flicked a glance at Rask's scowling countenance. "That happens to be a recognized right in law, Bill. The light's not good in here; I'll have to step over to the window."

"Go ahead!" Rask gave him a mocking laugh. "Your stalling is about over."

Alva glanced above the paper at the street below. His pulse leaped as he saw Cress race out of the bank. Big Bill had moved over to the door. He turned the key in the lock and exchanged a glance with Patton.

"They seem to be all right," Linscott remarked. He didn't have over several hundred dollars in his wallet. He started counting it out, placing one bill at a time on the counter.

Patton's smug looked broadened to a sneering grin as he peered into the lawyer's purse and saw how little was there.

Down below Benton knocked a man out of his way and took the stairs three at a time. When he tried the door and found it locked, he rattled the knob furiously and then backed away and crashed into it with a splintering impact that snapped the bolt.

The rush with which Cress popped him into the room carried him up against the counter. He thrust the money into Alva's hand. "This will be enough," he grunted.

Bill Rask knew he was beaten here. The shattered door stood open, and he made for it.

"Oh, no," Benton muttered. Whipping around he clipped his man with a long, whistling right that caught Rask off balance and sent him tottering along the wall and away from the door.

OUTSIDE, men were rushing into the hall, attracted by the noise. Cress closed the door and kicked a chair in front of it to keep it closed. Bill stood there, swaying with rage. By chance, neither was armed. He was rather glad of it. He had never been averse to using his fists. There was something in the thought of hammering Benton's face to a pulp that held some primal sense of satisfaction a gun could not give.

Cress moved out into the center of the room, wanting to keep Rask's back against the wall. In size, there was nothing to choose between them. Bill's bulk was the fat of easy living; Benton's one hundred and ninety pounds were all bone and muscle. If it gave him an advantage, it was slight, for there was an impression of brute strength and imperviousness to hurt in Bill Rask's heavy shoulders and long arms.

He lowered his head suddenly and rushed at Cress. There was a trickle of blood on his jaw. Seeing it there and knowing his fist had torn that hated face sent a wild exhilaration whipping through Benton. Deliberately, he waited for the other to close in, balancing lightly on the balls of his feet, thinking to rip in a short, chopping blow with his left hand, leap clear and come back with another long, driving right as Rask stepped past him.

He reached Bill's face easily enough, ripping his mouth, but he failed to get away. The full force of the man's beefy shoulders was solidly behind the fist that he sent crashing into Benton's jaw. It sent Cress to the floor, the room foggy in his eyes. He scrambled to his knees, his arms spread wide to grab Bill's legs and drag him down. It stopped the latter, and he backed away.

At the counter Linscott had paid over the money and got the deed. Charlie Hoblitzell, the county clerk, was trying to get in. Alva pushed the man's head back through the shattered panel of the door and sat down heavily in the chair Cress had put against it.

"This is something that's needed settling for a long while," he growled at Hoblitzell. "There won't be any interference."

Cress was on his feet again. Rask was deceivingly fast. Once was

enough, he told himself; he wouldn't make that mistake a second time. To lash out with his good right hand, to keep him off with his left, was the way to bring him down. In quick succession he shook his man three times. Rask took the punishing blows and fired back. Only when he foolishly tried to set himself for a blow from the knees that would stretch Benton on the floor could the latter hammer him at will.

With excited faces peering through the shattered door, Linscott and Patton watching every move and the panting of the two men loud in the stuffy, violent silence of the room, the battle raged. They had grown up hating each other. The sting and grudges of a dozen years were being partly paid off now, and nothing short of rendering the other helpless had any place in the mind of either man.

Cress crashed against the counter, tearing it loose from its fastenings. His right eye was closing. Blood was slipping over his chin and spattering on his shirt. He licked at it unconsciously. Rask's iron fists were like hammers. Benton knew he had to get away from them or go down. He feinted to the left and went around the other way. It fooled Bill. For a split second he was wide open. Cress put all he had left into the driving right that caught Rask just below the chin. It lifted the man to his toes, his eyes glazing. His legs seemed to turn to rubber, and he sank down until he was on the floor with his knees under him.

Benton waited for him to get up, his lungs heaving. Rask slowly untangled himself and stood erect, wobbly and uncertain. Cress dropped him again. When Rask went down for the third time he was a battered, helpless wreck. He lay on the floor, not trying to move.

CRESS fought off his weariness and pushed Linscott away. "If you've got the papers we'll get out of here," he said thickly, his swollen, puffed lips a torture.

From his office Alva sent out for a piece of raw beef and some ice. Cress was too savagely happy to take these ministrations without protest.

"Don't bother this way," he insisted. "I licked him! I've got those twelve sections! That's what counts!"

"You stay here on this couch and do what I tell you," Linscott ordered. "I'll buy you a new shirt. I'm not sending you back to Wild Horse in this shape."

By train time he had Benton looking half-way presentable, save for one eye.

"That's a beautiful shiner you've got, Cress," he said with a grin. "I don't mind telling you it's something to be proud of. I've got the papers in this envelope, together with the balance of the money. When you and Hethrington get around to the contract stage, send me word and I'll come up."

Alleged eye-witness accounts of the fight had quickly got around town, and news of it travelled back to Wild Horse on the train with Benton. He found Ryan waiting for him. Cash drew his own conclusions when he saw Cress's patched face and black eye.

"Am I entitled to know where you got the decorations?" he inquired as he touched up the team.

Cress told him what had happened. Cash sighed regretfully. "I'd have given a month's wages to have seen it!"

"Did Hethrington's men come?" Cress asked.

"Yeh, this morning. He wanted a room cleared out that he could use for an office. I had Curly fix him up. All three of them went up to the lake after dinner. He told me to tell you he might not be down to the house for several days."

"Good," Cress murmured. "By the way, I saw Jim Cameron before I went down to the Lodge. He's agreed to go all the way with me. Everything seems to be moving in the right direction. How's the crew taking it?" He surmised that there had been whisperings enough by now for the men to have gathered a rough idea of what was in the wind.

Ryan scowled in the darkness. "It was a bitter pill for some of them

to swallow. I called them together last night and told them the truth. I thought it was the wisest thing to do."

"It was," Benton agreed. "I'd have talked plainly to them tomorrow if you hadn't. After what happened in the Lodge this afternoon there's nothing secret about it."

In the afternoon two days later Jim Cameron rode into the Flat Iron house. He sat grinning in his saddle as he faced Cress.

"I just heard about what you did Rask," he said. "That must have been something to see. I'm here to get the details first hand." Cress laughed.

"Get down and I'll give them to you," he offered.

They sat out on the gallery talking for an hour. More important to both than the licking of Bill Rask was the fact that Flat Iron now owned Split Rock Creek.

Jim was getting ready to leave when Hethrington rode in. Cress introduced the two men.

"How does it go?" Benton asked the engineer. He saw the latter hesitate. "It's all right," he assured him. "Jim has come in with us; you can speak freely."

"I didn't know, of course," Hethrington said apologetically. "We've made a profile map already and some soil tests. If you care to step inside I'll spread the map out on the table and tell you how it looks to me."

BENTON and Cameron followed him into the room that had been turned over to the engineer.

"I don't know how whether you can read this map or not," Hethrington said when he was ready, "but if you'll follow my finger I'll trace the course we'll have to use. This is just a crude map, of course....It goes about like this."

"Is the pitch as steep as that?" Benton asked, frankly surprised.

"Just about, Mr. Benton. Gravity water will be moving down those canyons so fast it will tear things out. I've examined the soil in a number of places. It's sandy, as you know. We've got to control the water we bring down. The only way to do that is to build a number of check dams, unless we can find a natural reservoir." He put his finger on a blue circle on the map. "This would solve the problem."

"Why, that's the Grand Coulee!" Cress exclaimed. "That's rich graze in there, the best I've got. I don't want to put it under water."

"I'd advise doing it," Hethrington told him. "Check dams are expensive; they couldn't be finished this fall. There's one compensating value to using the Grand Coulee; you'll have water on your high range to use as you please. In a year or two it will give you back more grass than you lose."

Benton thought it over for a minute.

"All right," he decided. "It's not what I expected, but I want this job completed by October, even if it means losing the coulee. You go ahead."

Cameron declined an invitation to supper. Cress walked out to the horse rack with him.

"When will I be seeing you again, Jim?"

"Why, any time. As you said this afternoon, the news of what we're going to do will be all over the district quickly now. There was an item in yesterday's Ledger about your buying that Split Rock Creek stuff. That'll give Greenway and the rest something to think about right off. There was another little item that won't set so well, either."

"What was that?" Cress asked.

"The county commissioners have voted to appropriate money to set up some experimental stations for plant and animal pest control."

"The crust of it!" Benton exclaimed. "Do you know what's behind this, Jim? Triple K cows have been dying from some sort of poison on the old Sylvain range. This is Bill Rask's way of making the county pay the bill for finding out what it is."

"Crust, you call it?" Cameron replied. "I could give it a better name!

If it isn't an outrageous and criminal misuse of county funds, I'm crazy!"

Cress shook his head. "You couldn't prove it. They'll bring in some professors from the Bureau of Animal Husbandry and make it look awful virtuous. But maybe Rask has gone too far this time; maybe this will be the straw that will make some of the two-humped camels around Wild Horse realize that what we're offering them is salvation! Let the word get around. It won't hurt us a bit!"

CHAPTER X

No Turning Back

JIM CAMERON had no difficulty in setting tongues to wagging about what was behind the county's appropriation of funds for the experiment stations. Stockmen were used to having a few cows die every year of mysterious causes. They wrote that loss off as a natural expense. They knew loco weed and wild parsnip tubers were poisonous, and they tried to keep their cows away from them. Spending tax money in an expensive, organized study of the matter to help Bill Rask out of his difficulty enraged them just as Cress had predicted it would. He felt that it couldn't have come at a better time, as far as his plans were concerned.

"There's nothing they can do about it," he said to Ryan. "It's like everything else in Box Elder; this end of the county has no voice in the laws that are passed. We've got one commissioner on the board, and he's voted down every meeting."

Cash was going into Wild Horse on business. He realized as well as Benton that the plant and pest control appropriation wasn't the only grievance the district had on its mind.

"There's all sorts of rumors flying," he said. "Wiggins told me one of Greenway's punchers was ribbing him yesterday about being a hayseed. The ranch hands will be just as bitter about what you're doing as the owners. They'll figure their jobs are going." He picked up the reins. "Reckon I'll get an earful in town."

Cress was too absorbed with the progress Hethrington was making to devote much time to what his neighbors were saying. He expected their violent opposition at first. By late August the pinch would be on them, however, and he counted on it to have a sobering influence. The month had come in, hot and dry, and there was very little water in the river.

He rode up to the site of the high dam that morning. The flow had almost ceased there.

"The need of water will be the deciding factor," he said to himself. "All the prejudices and hatred won't keep them from doing business with me if I can just stick it out."

It was some distance above where the high dam had stood, about where they had launched the raft that had destroyed it, that Hethrington planned to bring down the mother ditch. The stakes were up already. Benton followed them. Just below the coulee he found the engineers working.

"We'll wind this up today," Hethrington told him. "We're staking off the lateral ditches now. Have you seen how we're coming down across Cameron's land?"

"No, I haven't been over for a couple days. You didn't think you'd have any difficulty getting there."

"We'll have to put a steam shovel in there in a couple places," Hethrington replied. "Nothing serious. I ought to have some figures for you tomorrow. Have you given any thought to how we're going to get our heavy equipment across the river? You'd have to get a permit to bridge it even temporarily, and a bridge would run into money."

"You bet I've thought of it," Cress returned. "The commissioners would never give me a permit; Rask would see to that. There's mighty little water in the river this morning. There'll be less in another ten days. It's a hard, shallow ford where the road ends. We'll have to lay some heavy timbers on the river-

bed and bring your shovel and material across that way."

Hethrington agreed that that would do. "I'll leave it to you to handle that part of it," he said. "I'll give you a day's warning, so you can be ready."

BENTON returned to the house buoyed up by the knowledge that he would soon have something more tangible to point to than a line of snub-nosed stakes. He was prepared to go to Cheyenne as soon as he could take some definite information as to costs with him.

Ryan was back in the early evening. He reported that the talk in Wild Horse was just what Cress felt it must be.

"Cameron ain't got any more friends now than you have," Cash told him. "I talked to Steve Hoffman—rather he did the talking and I did all the listening. He claims you're just ruining the country in order to get even with Bill Rask. He didn't say how, but he warned me folks would stop you."

"Steve gets hot pretty easy," was Cress's comment. "He didn't tell you what he's going to do for water these next two months, did he?"

"Don't any of 'em know. I noticed that Reb was putting up his first crop of hay. It's all he'll get this year...." He glanced into the dining room where a lamp still burned, though the crew had long since finished supper. "I'll see if Curly can get the cook to rustle up a little something to eat." He turned back at the door to add, "We're going to have one of the experiment stations right on our doorstep. A couple of these experts have taken over the abandoned Dry Creek school. They've moved in with their stuff already."

"Let them stay there," Cress said without interest. "I don't propose to have them bothering me."

"They'll be up here snooping around, I reckon. One of 'em is a woman. She was out in front when I drove by this morning—a tall, honey-haired girl wearing a pair of levis. Pretty enough, but she looks too young to know anything. The other one's a dried out, baldheaded little runt of a man, I hear. First place he lit out for was the Sylvain place."

"Naturally," Benton observed cynically.

From the first Cress had realized that he would have to put a mortgage on the ranch to hold up his end of the irrigation project. He was aware that nothing he might ever do would run so contrary to his father's course. Old Ki had feared mortgages and bank loans more than he did the devil; when he needed something and didn't have the cash for it, he did without it. Though it was a settled matter in Cress's mind, after mulling it over again this evening he had to admit that unless he got some generous help from the railroad he would be putting Flat Iron in jeopardy.

"I may have taken a lot for granted in being so sure they'd come in with me," he mused. "It's certainly too late to begin worrying about it now."

He knew the figures Hethrington would place before him would run up toward a hundred thousand dollars. He'd have to have at least half of that sum advanced by the railroad. It would mean turning over to it a good share of the land he was ready to sell. It was just a matter of simple arithmetic for him to prove that if he could dispose of the rest at an average price of ten dollars an acre he would have most of his investment back.

"I ought to do that well," he argued. "There's no better land in the state."

EVENTUALLY, the money he received for the land would be largely profit; the expense of putting in the irrigation system and cost of its upkeep would gradually be returned to him out of the water tolls. As he had told Jim Cameron, he did not ask for the project to do more than pay for itself.

Hethrington was ready for him the next afternoon. Benton thumbed through the pages to the bid for the

job. He saw he hadn't missed the figure by much.

"I've broken it down so you can see where the money will go," the engineer explained. Cress shook his head.

"I've got to trust to your integrity," he said. "I wouldn't know any more about it if I sat here pouring over these sheets for the rest of the day. I'll go into town tomorrow and see the bank. I'll have Linscott come up and work out a contract."

"Fair enough," Hethrington declared. "Is it safe for me to wire my construction boss to start rounding up a gang of men and begin loading the tools and material we'll need?"

"Yes," Benton answered soberly. "I don't anticipate any difficulty about the money, but no matter what happens, I'm going through with this. When Linscott gets here we'll work out some satisfactory arrangement of paying as the work goes along."

"Then I'll go into Wild Horse now and get my wires off. It will save a day. I could send your telegram off to Linscott at the same time, if you say so. That might have him tomorrow evening."

"Do that," Cress told him. "I'll bring him out with me tomorrow."

Benton spent a restless night. In his desire to gain time he had taken on the whole load in telling Hethrington to go ahead. He knew he would have no peace of mind until he learned what the Wyoming and Western would do.

When he started for town in the morning, he drove rapidly. He had not quite reached the river when he saw a rig moving toward him over the ranch road. The distance between them narrowed in a few minutes. Ryan's description of the girl at the Dry Creek schoolhouse had been pointed enough to leave no doubt in Benton's mind about the identity of the stranger. She pulled up as they were at the point of passing.

"Would you be Mr. Cress Benton, by any chance?" she inquired.

"Yes, I'm Benton," he answered, prepared to tell her that Flat Iron did not require her services, but thinking, too, that Ryan had made a mistake in concluding that she didn't know anything. She was young, but there was a quiet confidence about her and an aura of intelligence and efficiency that warned Benton that she would not be easily brushed aside.

"I am Donna Collett," she said. "Doctor Adams's assistant; we have just established the station at the old Dry Creek school."

There was an animation about her when she spoke that gave her young face a breathless eagerness. Cress began to think that Cash had made a second mistake in saying she was pretty enough. That was a distant understatement, Benton thought.

"I imagined you were from the station," he said, some of the unfriendliness gone from his tone. "I am on way to town on rather important business this morning. What was it you wanted of me, Miss Collett?"

"You know why Dr. Adams and I are here, Mr. Benton. I only wanted to ask if we had your permission to see what we can find on the Flat Iron."

Cress shook his head firmly. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I don't want to be rude, but we seem to get along well enough without any help from outside. I believe you will find other stockmen around here feel as I do. When you've completed your work on the Rask ranch, I think you'll find your job is finished."

Donna Collett's blue eyes did not lose their smile. "I'm sorry to find you as prejudiced as the others. I've had it repeated to me several times already that no one wants the control station in this part of the county; that it is a waste of money."

"It isn't so much that it's money wasted as the way it was put over on us that galls."

"I'VE heard that, too," Donna acknowledged. "I can assure you that Dr. Adams and I have only a scientific interest in the matter. That's true of the half a dozen other researchers manning the different

stations. We were sent up here by the Bureau of Animal Husbandry to locate and identify the poisonous plant life that destroys half a million dollars worth of livestock in this state every year, and to make the knowledge available to you cowmen. If there was any crooked political manipulation behind the establishing of the controls, we had no hand in it."

"I'm not saying you did," Cress informed her without retreating from his position. "I'm only trying to explain my unwillingness to cooperate with you."

Donna's head went up an inch or two. Cress couldn't help remarking to himself that where the morning sun touched her yellow hair it seemed to turn it to spun gold.

"Does that mean you refuse to give us free access to your ranch?" she asked, not trying to hide her annoyance.

"I don't believe I am under any compulsion to give you that privilege," Benton replied. "Things are not normal on this range. Under the circumstances, I would consider the presence of any outsider on Flat Iron just plain snooping."

Though Donna recoiled involuntarily, she continued to hold her head high.

"I don't suppose it is diplomatic of me to say it, but aren't you being a little pig-headed, Mr. Benton?"

Cress laughed. "Perhaps I am. Do you always use such strong language, Miss Collett—or should I say Dr. Collett?"

"In the several days I've been here," she continued without recognizing the interruption, "I've talked with a number of people. I have yet to hear one good word said in your behalf. Your grandiose plans for Medicine Valley have been repeated to me. Your unselfishness appears to be open to the most violent suspicion. In fact, I would say you are even more unpopular than I. Somehow, I felt people might be wrong about you; that what you plan doing you actually intend for the good of the community. I'm afraid I can't hold that opinion any longer. If you will drive on, I'll turn my horse around and go back to the station."

Cress knew he was being dismissed, and on his own range, and he didn't like it. And yet, for some obscure reason, he found himself wanting this girl's good opinion. He took a strange way of going about winning it, for as he raised the reins he said, "I suppose your Dr. Adams discovered that Rask's cows died because they got hold of some parsnip tubers."

"The tops would have killed them," Donna informed him pityingly. "But it wasn't wild parsnips they had eaten; it was the leaves of choke cherry trees that grow rank along the little creek."

That was too much for Benton.

"Honestly, Dr. Collett, you don't mean to tell me that choke cherry leaves will hurt a cow," he declared patronizingly. "I'm afraid if that's a sample of your scientific knowledge you won't get far. I've seen cattle eat choke cherry leaves in the spring when nothing else was green. It never hurt one that I knew of."

Donna gave him a very superior glance. "That was in the spring," she said icily. "Don't let them do it after the first hot days of July, or you will lose them....I'll bid you good morning, Mr. Benton!"

Cress drove on, a curious expression in his gray eyes. "I'll check on that one myself when I get down to Cheyenne," he murmured. "I'll find out whether I made an ass of myself or not."

He recalled that more than once cows had died in convulsions in late summer in the high canyons where there was water and patches of choke cherry. Neither his father nor Ryan had ever been able to advance an explanation. That the leaves could be harmless at one time of the year and deadly poisonous at another was hard for him to believe. But that was not the only matter troubling him.

"I guess I was pretty rough with her," he admitted. "We're both in the same boat, in a way; I can stand

being ignored, but it must be hard on her."

HE had other things that should have claimed his complete attention this morning. Somehow, he found Donna intruding on his thoughts all the way to town. It was not until he walked into the bank and sat down at Cal Stark's desk that she faded from his mind. He discovered at once that Stark had heard all the rumors concerning himself. Cress spoke frankly of his plans.

"I'm here to negotiate a loan, Cal," he told the banker. "I also want you to turn the bonds the old man left me into cash."

"How much are you going to need?" Stark asked.

"Thirty-five thousand now. If things don't work out my way, I'll need that much more before I'm through. There isn't a piece of paper out against Flat Iron; the security is there for all I'll ask."

"Yes," Stark agreed, pulling at his long mustache, a mannerism of his when he was being cautious. "Potentially, the ranch is worth many times that amount."

"Potentially?" Benton echoed with a touch of indignation. "You don't sound very enthusiastic about this, Cal."

Stark put down his cigar. "I believe in looking at the worst side of a proposition. It might be difficult to dispose of a property as large as Flat Iron if that ever became necessary. I'll grant you that's a remote contingency. What I'm really thinking of is your father. It's the business of this bank to loan money on good security, but Ki Benton was my friend. I feel that I owe it to him to advise you to be careful, Cress. You're counting on the Wyoming and Western for help. You may not get it; the road is not in good financial shape right now. They'll be glad to further anything that promises to help the company's business, short of investing money."

"I'll go it alone if I have to," Benton declared doggedly. "No argument you could use on me would change my mind about that."

"All right," Stark gave in. "You can have the thirty-five thousand. If you'll drop in this afternoon and put your signature on the papers, I'll put the money to your account. As for the bonds, the bank will take them off your hands at their face value. I'll do that, Cress, just to show you that I think you're doing the only thing that will bring peace and prosperity back to this end of the county. Just be careful, that's all; I don't want to see you fail."

It was sage, kindly disposed advice. Benton accepted it as such, though he was no longer in any need of having a brake applied to his enthusiasm; he knew only too well that he was risking everything. Walking up the street to the Morgan House for dinner, he was more determined than ever to learn quickly what the railroad would do. He did not try to deny that what Stark had told him was discouraging. Every family that was brought in would help to increase the freight and passenger traffic of the company. He realized there would be nothing he could do to prevent it even if the W and W refused to do a thing for him.

"I could refuse to go through with it," he thought. "That might bring them to terms."

Three or four men were having dinner at the hotel. They did not speak to him. Chad Harvey, Ford's father, sat by himself in the corner. He was a round, dumpy little man who liked to quote the Bible. Though he abhorred strong drink and guns as the twin abominations of the devil, his opinions were respected. He was passing Benton's table on the way out when he stopped without warning.

"I admire your spunk, Benton," he said loud enough for every man in the dining room to hear. "You're either a fool or a prophet come to lead us out of this wilderness of violence and injustice. I don't believe Ki would have raised a fool."

HE continued on out, oblivious to the scowls that followed him.

"Prophet!" someone snorted contemptuously across the room. "That psalm-singin' old hypocrite better find out what side of the bread the butter's on, or keep his lip buttoned!"

Cress didn't try to identify the voice. What Harvey had said had given him a lift, not that he tried to read into it any promise of support; now that Chad was Cherry Grinnell's father-in-law, he could hardly be expected to take a stand against Reb and the Association. But this incident would get around. If it did nothing else it would cause talk and make men wonder if there were other undiscovered cracks in the wall of opposition to the irrigation project.

During the afternoon Cress concluded his business at the bank. Alva arrived on the evening train.

"We'll get supper at the ranch," Benton suggested. "I've a lot to say to you and we can talk freely on the way out."

Cress brought him up to date on what had happened.

"Cal would know," Linscott said, referring to what the banker had said about the Wyoming and Western. "You may be in for a disappointment. Do you want me to go to Cheyenne with you?"

"No, I'll go alone. I can play a fair hand of poker. The Wyoming and Western will have to shove some chips to the center of the table before they see my cards." Thinking of Cheyenne suggested another matter to be looked into there. Though it was far afield, he asked, without changing his tone, and to the lawyer's hilarious amazement, "Alva, did you ever hear that choke cherry leaves are deadly poisonous during July and August—to cattle, I mean?"

"Good heavens, no!" Linscott roared, holding his sides. "I never heard they were poisonous in September or October, either! Whatever put that in your mind?"

Cress grinned. "I guess I did creep up on you that time." His amusement faded quickly. "I was told this morning by one of the scientists the bureau sent up on this pest control that the cows Rask has been losing on the Sylvain range died because they had been eating choke cherry."

"Well, why not take his word for it?" Alva queried lightly.

"It doesn't happen to be a him."

"Oh, I see," Linscott observed with a knowing nod. "Young, I suppose?"

"Yeh, and all in a dither about the importance of her work. Called me pig-headed when I refused to give her the run of the ranch."

"Did she?" Alva smiled to himself. "Luckily these young research workers are usually homely as sin and you don't have to be afraid of them....Her name wouldn't be Dr. Donna Collett, would it?" he asked innocently. Benton whipped around on the seat.

"How did you know?" he demanded.

"Her mother and father are old friends of mine—and Donna, too. She's only been out of the university about a year." He chuckled at Cress's expense. "I'll have to say hello to her before I go back. Her father wrote me that she was somewhere around Wild Horse. If she told you choke cherry leaves are poisonous, they are. You can be sure of it, and of anything else she tells you."

The Dry Creek school was in darkness when they drove by. A tent had been pitched out in the yard. A faint light burned within. Cress saw an elderly man open the tent flap and peer out at them. He correctly surmised that it was Dr. Winslow Adams, Donna's superior.

HETHRINGTON was on hand to discuss the contract with Benton and Linscott that evening. By noon of next day it had been signed. It was a sober moment for Cress, and one of satisfaction, too.

"I know what this means to you," Linscott said to him. "The difficulties may pile up on you, but you'll go on. I've seen you get up off the floor when you were licked. It's

pretty hard to stop anyone like that."

"I don't intend to be stopped until I've made the name of Rask meaningless in this county," Cress replied, tight of lip. "I'll give all I've got to it."

He went upstairs to toss some things in a bag for the trip to Cheyenne. He encountered old Curly moving around the house with a glum look on his grizzled face.

"What's the matter with you?" Cress asked. "You look as though we were having a funeral here."

"I'm not so sure we ain't," Curly croaked. "It ain't a cow ranch no more—not the kind yore paw ran. In a week or so we'll have a steam shovel and scrapers tearin' the bowels outa this range—half a hundred men diggin' ditches and changin' the shape o' things. If the Lord had ever wanted Wolf Lake to flow this way, He'd have arranged it."

Cress refused to be cross with him. "Give me a chance, Curly. There's going to be some changes, of course, but maybe I'll have you and the old man cheering for me a little by the time I'm through."

Dutch drove Linscott and him into town that afternoon. At Alva's request, they stopped at Dry Creek. They found no one there, however. The lawyer left a note for Donna.

Benton's train left an hour before the westbound local. Linscott shook hands with him on the station platform and wished him luck.

"Put an if in everything you say to them down there," he advised. "You're the biggest shipper they've got in this part of the state. You could drive your beef over to the U. P. if—"

Cress grinned as he swung up the car steps. "I'll give 'em both barrels, Alva!"

CHAPTER XI

Win or Lose All

BENTON WAS received cordially by Dan Gatchel, the head of the Wyoming and Western's farm and colonization department, a few minutes after he walked into the company's general offices in Cheyenne.

"We've been doing business with you and your father for a good many years," Gatchel told him. "I'm going to call in Costain, our general freight agent. I'm sure he'd like to meet you."

"Suppose I tell my story to the two of you," Cress suggested when the amenities had been exchanged. "It should interest both of your departments. I know it will triple the business the railroad is getting out of the Wild Horse district."

"We'll sit here and listen to you all day if you can show us how that can be done," Costain declared laughingly. "Go ahead!"

Benton outlined his plans. They received an enthusiastic reception until he touched the part the railroad was to play in the enterprise. He could feel Gatchel tightening up.

"It's a big thing you're doing, Benton," Costain declared. "It'll make the eastern half of Box Elder County. Who's going to handle the job for you?"

"John Hethrington, of Denver."

"You couldn't find a better man. When are you going to get things under way?"

"Immediately," Benton answered. "How far I go will depend on what you people are ready to do for me."

"Oh, we'll be glad to help you all we can," Gatchel assured him. "I've had the idea for a long time that something could be done along the upper Medicine. Every time I suggested it, I was just about run out of Wild Horse. I'm glad to see you going ahead with it, Benton. When you're ready, I can interest a group of Norwegians, back in Minnesota, in moving out here. They're dirt farmers, with money enough to handle a quarter section each. They're an industrious people. Some of them have their first papers already."

Cress shook his head firmly. He didn't intend to wait for men with only their first papers to become citizens of the United States.

"I want Americans," he said, "citi-

zens of this country, who can go to the polls and vote on Election Day. But that isn't the main issue here, Mr. Gatchel. When you tell me the Wyoming and Western will help me in every way it can, it doesn't mean anything. There's only one way the railroad can aid me; that's by helping to shoulder part of the financial load. I daresay you would be delighted to have me complete this undertaking and make the company a present of the increased business that would come its way. You would undoubtedly be quite willing to sell tickets and collect freight charges. That's not my idea of how it's going to be handled."

"Don't feel that way about it," Gatchel protested. "I'll send one of our engineers up to look things over. If his report is—"

"You needn't bother to do that," Cress interrupted. "I'm not asking the railroad to invest a cent in the construction; all I want you to do is to buy a couple thousand acres of my flatlands, contingent on my ability to deliver water to it. If I fail to do it in a reasonable time, the deal can be cancelled. Irrigated farm land at twenty dollars an acre is a bargain."

Knowing what the outcome must be, Costain withdrew and left Gatchel to give Cress the run-around.

"That sounds fair enough," the latter said. "Unfortunately, our earnings for the last quarter fell off so badly that it means retrenching all along the line. But I'm solidly for this, and I'll present it at the next meeting of our directors. Knowing how they feel right now, I think I can tell you what their reaction will be. I believe they'll insist on the water being on the land before they put fifty thousand dollars into it."

BENTON KNEW he was being turned down. Gatchel was wrapping it up in regrets and unfortunate circumstances, but the result was the same. It was true that Flat Iron could reach the U. P. Railroad, thirty miles south of Wild Horse, and ship its beef cattle to market that way, as Linscott had suggested. Cress thought of it now and found it an impractical argument. Thirty miles added to a trail drive would take fat off the steers and add to the expense of shipping. He didn't believe pressure could be put on the Wyoming and Western that way. But he didn't intend to walk out of Gatchel's office without leaving a challenge, even though it was only a bluff.

"It doesn't sound promising enough to bother about," he said guilelessly. "I can forget the irrigation end of my scheme without any regrets. As I told you, I'm going to use the coulee as a natural reservoir. I can bring the water that far, and stop. It'll give it to me where I need it, on my high range. You know what the new law has done to the river. All I'll have to do is sit back and wait for next summer to roll around; I'll have every stockman between Flat Iron and Indian Crossing begging me to sell them water. I can get my investment back that way. And there's always the chance that the Union Pacific may build a branch line up to Wild Horse."

Gatchel winced unconsciously. Unlikely as he regarded the possibility of competition, he promptly talked it down.

"They'll never take that step, Benton, as long as they continue to get about ninety per cent of the freight that originates on our road. But when you talk about stopping at the coulee, you surely don't mean that. You've got a fortune in your hand. You won't throw it away."

Cress gave him a frosty smile. "You'll find I'll do a lot of things rather than be taken for a sucker."

Gatchel walked to the door with him, insisting that they have lunch together. Benton refused the invitation; he wanted to get out of town.

He wrote Linscott at length before he left Cheyenne, telling him how he had fared.

"I know I've got to go it alone," he wrote. "But my chin is still up. Saying I'd stop at the coulee was just bluff, of course. I don't expect anything to come of it. But I am going to see to it that when Hethrington goes to work that he tackles the job from the Wolf Lake end, rather than

down below. When I get ready to ship this fall, I'm going to make the long drive to the U. P.—not to bite off my nose to spite my face, as the saying goes, but because it may worry these highbinders here in Cheyenne."

Cress returned to the ranch to be told that Triple K had tried to make good Buck Marr's threat to run big Bat out of the Crossing.

"When did this happen?" he asked Ryan.

"Early last evening. Dutch did his best to get his finger in the pie." Cash was provoked about it. "I don't mind him remembering he's got a grudge against that bunch, but my orders were to stay on our side of the fence. I understood that if Chadron asked for a favor he was to get it, but I didn't know we'd taken him under our wing. That seems to be the crew's idea."

"I'm afraid it's my fault," Benton told him. "Bat's pulled us out of two bad holes that I know of. I undoubtedly said something that the men have taken up. You know I wouldn't go over your head, Cash. I couldn't turn Bat down after what's happened, but if he wants to stick it out at the Crossing, he'll have to do it on his own. You send Dutch up to the house; I'll make that plain to him."

Schilling walked into the office a few minutes later, as unabashed as ever. Cress liked the happy-go-lucky puncher so well that it was difficult for him to be severe with him.

"You're in the dog-house with Ryan," he said. "What about this ruckus at the Crossing last night?"

"Some unknown parties—yuh can imagine how unknown they are—rode by Bat's place last evenin' and shot out what he had left in the way of windows. 'Bout half an hour later they come back ag'in. In the meantime Bat's got himself a big buffalo gun and is barricaded by the door. When they open up this second time, he starts blastin' 'em with that cannon."

"Well?" Cress prompted.

"Wal, Bat's still holdin' the fort." Dutch's puckered blue eyes lost their smile. "He had that big gun loaded with buckshot. It musta torn some of them skunks wide open."

"Yeh," Benton grunted. "What were you doing there?"

"Wal, I was down in the far corner near the gate when I heard all that bangin'." Dutch pulled at his hat a moment. "I figgered the Frenchman might need a little help."

"When Bat needs help from us, let him come to me for it," Cress said with authority, though he found Dutch's crooked smile hard to resist. "Ryan told you to stay on your side of the fence. In the future, see that you do. Get out of here now, and don't get in his hair again or you'll find yourself peeling potatoes for the cook."

HETHRINGTON was quite willing to establish his camp at the lake and work down from there.

"That's where the biggest part of the job will have to be done," he told Benton. "We'll be up there a few weeks. I received word yesterday that they're beginning to put the stuff on the cars in Denver. They'll load the mules last. I've arranged with the agent in Wild Horse to let us unload at the station before the empties are spotted on to that snaky-looking siding below the corrals. It seems to be the only place where we won't be in the way when the steer-shipping starts."

"How many cars will you have?" Benton asked.

"A carload of mules, two bunk cars and four flats....You better be ready for us at the river by the end of the week." When Hethrington had popped into the office it was just for a moment, he had said. But he sat down now and filled his pipe. "I don't want to try to tell you your business, Benton," he observed with some hesitation. "You've been frank with me; I wonder if you would let me say what's on my mind."

"Sure," Cress replied, surprised and, for some reason, apprehensive.

"I know the way things went in Cheyenne has upset you," the engineer observed. "I can't help wondering if you aren't putting the shoe on the wrong foot. What Gatchel said

to you doesn't sound half as important to me as what he didn't say."

"I don't know whether I get you or not," Benton confessed.

"It's just this: the Wyoming and Western may be a lot more interested in your proposition than you were given any reason to believe. This talk about retrenching doesn't mean a thing; that road has had its ups and downs for ten years; in the fall, when stockmen are shipping, it has more business than it can handle; for the rest of the year it's slim pickings. Fifty thousand dollars, or several times that amount, is a drop in the bucket when you think of the investment they've got. They're not tossing over their shoulder anything that promises to pull them out of the red. I've spent a good part of my life working for big corporations; I know how they function; they always let the other fellow do the sweating and proving up; when things are ripe, they move in."

"I'm not counting on them," Benton said flatly. "If I really thought my bluff about stopping at the coulee would stand up, I'd have you bury the stakes from there down to the river. I'll get along without doing business with them."

"I don't believe you will," was Hethrington's soberly considered answer. "They'll outlast you, Benton —wear you down. They'll keep informed as to the progress we make. Long before we reach Grand Coulee it will be obvious to everyone that the water can be brought down. The Wyoming and Western will put out feelers about then. They'll offer you less than half of what you'll take, and they'll want control of the project."

"They'll never get it!" Cress was tremendously sober and determined about it. "I'll be the one to say what rates are to be charged for the water and who is to be put on the land. You know why I went into this. I'm not going to lose sight of my real goal."

"I think you have done that already, in a way," Hethrington said with the good hard sense that had made him a successful man. "I know it's enough to rile anyone to see the plums dropping into the other fellow's basket. But you shouldn't let that become your problem; it shouldn't matter to you how much the railroad profits through your efforts. You've got a bigger purpose."

"It won't matter if they'll do business with me." Even though Benton's respect for the man's judgment was great, this criticism was getting under his skin. Hethrington shook his head, unwilling to let it go at that, now that he had spoken at all.

"They'll do business with you, or offer to," he said. "That won't be your difficulty. I'm afraid you'll find that your real problem will be not to do business with them. You've said several times that you wanted to bring in about three hundred farm families. Have you any idea where you're going to find them on your own? It would be just a routine measure for the railroad. They can offer a farmer a cheap rate, put his goods and himself in a box car and ship him out here. You can't hold out any inducement like that. It takes an organization to colonize a district. I don't want to add to your worries, Benton, but it's always a good thing to look facts in the face. If you start bucking the Wyoming and Western, you'll be four to five years settling enough people here to swing the balance of power away from Medicine Lodge."

BENTON took it silently for a moment, his thinning lips white with his rising indignation as he stared across his desk at Hethrington.

"I don't believe it's quite as hopeless as that," he said curtly. "The W. and W. isn't the only railroad in this part of this state. Gatchel's telling me the Union Pacific wouldn't invade their territory because it gets most of Wyoming and Western freight doesn't frighten me; when that freight arrives in Cheyenne it has to be turned over to the U. P. if it's going to go on to Omaha or Denver."

"The Union Pacific may be your out," Hethrington admitted. "I hadn't thought of that. If you're going to

make any overtures to them, Steve Merriweather is the man for you to see. He happens to be an excellent friend of mine. I believe I could get him up here to have a look and talk things over with you. He's got authority enough to commit the road to building into Wild Horse. You'll at least get a straight answer from Steve."

Cress melted, his umbrage forgotten.

"I guess I needed a little talking to," he said apologetically. "You've straightened me out, John; I'll sleep a lot better for it. I've realized ever since I started back from Cheyenne that if I had to go it alone the real pinch would come when I started rounding up the people to put on the land. I know there's so-called 'land companies' in Chicago and other places. Most of them are shysters, but it was the best idea that occurred to me. If you'll write your friend Merriweather—"

"I will. And no hard feelings, Cress; I want to see you lick this proposition."

They talked a few minutes longer. On the way out Hethrington said, "No need to tell you to keep this quiet as long as you can. I don't want my material held up in transit."

Benton lay awake that night mulling over what Hethrington had said. He knew how true it all was. It occurred to him that he well could be chasing another rainbow in thinking that the Union Pacific would be interested.

"I took too much for granted with the Wyoming and Western; I won't make that mistake this time," he promised himself.

And yet, he fell asleep enlarging on what it would mean to Wild Horse if he could bring in another railroad and put the town on a transcontinental line. In all his dreaming he had never raised his sights that high. It would leave Medicine Lodge in the shade, a fading cow town, and nothing more.

He felt he should acquaint Cameron with the way things had shaped up, and in the morning he rode over the hills to the Box C.

There was stern stuff in Jim, and he listened to what Benton had to say without complaining. "It leaves us just about where we were, as far as I'm concerned," he said. "I expected there would be some disappointments. It's only a bare thirty miles from Wild Horse to White Sage, on the U. P., and only the low Gallatin Hills to cross. If they'll see it our way, we'll be better off than ever. If we got two railroads in here, maybe we could squeeze a decent freight rate out of them. That would appeal even to Reb Grinnell."

"It's just a chance, Jim," Cress declared conservatively. "Maybe it'll stand up. What's that pile of stuff at the end of the porch? It looks like fit weed."

"It does kinda. It's a Russian vetch. It only showed up in this country a few years ago. No one knows how it got here, Dr. Collett told me."

"OH, SHE'S been here, has she?" Cress observed, not sounding too pleased. Jim laughed.

"She told me you had run her off Flat Iron. I can't see the sense of that. I feel about as Chad Harvey does. He says they're here and we've got to help pay the bill, so why not take advantage of it, if they can do anything for us? I've had a couple of mighty sick cows for a day or two. One of them died yesterday. Dr. Collett performed an autopsy on it and found it had been eating this stuff. I've had the boys digging up all of it they could find, so we can burn it...She's attractive, isn't she?"

"I didn't bother to notice," Cress answered gruffly and hurried on to something else. "Hethrington says his construction train will roll into Wild Horse no later than Saturday. I'll be on hand with part of the crew to help him get the stuff moving this way."

"You anticipate any trouble about it?"

"No, we'll lay some timbers across the ford tomorrow—"

"I wasn't referring to that kind of trouble," Jim interrupted. "I'm just wondering if some organized attempt won't be made to smash hell out of

that stuff, once it gets moving along the road between town and the river. The Association has had some secret meetings lately. I wasn't invited, nor old man Harvey. Not a word has leaked out of what they've got up their sleeve. I can tell you this, though: Babe Grinnell and about twenty young fools of his age have been riding together the last few nights. They rode this way on Tuesday night and left a warning scrawled on my gate. You want to look out for them, Cress; they're reckless enough to try anything."

"I don't want any trouble with those kids," Benton answered, his gray eyes cloudy with misgivings. "But if they try to put on a raid, we'll have to stop them. I know what it'll mean if a couple of them get shot up."

"It'll be bad," Jim agreed. "It's Kinnard's job to break up a thing like that before it gets started. You've got time enough to communicate with him."

"I don't want to send for the sheriff," said Cress. The reasons were so obvious that he didn't bother to state them. "But anything will be better than fanning up a lot of new hatreds....I'll get in touch with Rip."

He was halfway home when he changed his course so that he would have to pass the Dry Creek school. He didn't know just what he was going to say to Donna.

"If I start eating humble pie, I'll be sure to get my ears slapped down again," he mused. "She took advantage of me, not saying anything about Linscott, and I'll let her know it."

One end of the little building had been fitted up as a field laboratory. Donna was busy with some test tubes when Benton rode up to the door.

"Anyone home?" he called.

"You may come in," she answered, recognizing his voice. "I'm engaged for a minute." She picked up a pen and pretended to jot down notes.

She was aware of him, a tall, lean shape in the doorway as she kept him waiting. Her minute became ten before she said guilelessly, "There! It took me longer than I thought."

"Your notes would be easier to read, wouldn't they, if you had some ink in your fountain pen?" Cress queried with an annoying grin. "Instead of trying to punish me for my pig-headedness the other morning, you should be apologizing. Why didn't you tell me you are acquainted with Alva Linscott?"

"Because I prefer to stand on my own feet, Mr. Benton," Donna answered lightly. "As for my fountain pen, I shall certainly have to be more careful in the future. You see, I'm not used to having people looking over my shoulder."

BENTON laughed. "Shall we call it even? We can't go on sniping at each other like this."

"It isn't very civilized, is it?" Donna's tone was softly bantering. "Won't you sit down? That box in the corner is our guest chair."

"I can only stay a minute," Cress answered. "I—I just wanted to tell you that you'll be welcome on Flat Iron. You can go where you please, but it better be under my personal escort. I think you realize that some parts of my range are going to be dangerous ground for the next few weeks."

Donna's mood changed. "It's a subject that everyone avoids when speaking to me," she said, her blue eyes large and sober. "I don't believe I should permit you to mention it. You know what my position must be."

Benton nodded. "I'm sure you're right. Your safety may depend on not knowing anything about this trouble. But don't be foolhardy about it, Doctor. The best way to keep from becoming involved in something that doesn't concern you is to walk away from it."

"I'm not alarmed about my safety," Donna told him. "I shall go wherever my work takes me. I discovered a dangerous enemy from Siberia on this range yesterday. It had not previously been identified in this part of the state. If the controls do not succeed in accomplishing anything else they'll have more than justified their expense."

"I've just come from Box C," Cress

murmured. "I suppose that poison vetch has got a foothold in more places than Cameron's range. But that doesn't change my mind about the trickery with which the appropriation was put through. It was not intended that we'd reap any benefit from it. The affairs of this county are conducted without any regard for our rights."

"From what I've heard, I suspect that's true." Donna's eyes were as steady and unwavering as his own. "Your indignation has a self-righteous ring, but, somehow, it doesn't arouse my sympathy. You resent what the Rasks have done to this district, but isn't it exactly what you propose to do to the rest of Box Elder, once you have the votes? I'm quite willing to believe you intend to be generous with your neighbors about the water, but as for the outsiders you hope to have settle here, they don't mean anything to you. They just represent votes in your mind, and the more the better....Big families and small farms," she added accusingly. "It's not a very noble business, Mr. Benton."

Cress realized that she had wormed her way into Cameron's confidence and got her information from him.

"That may be one way to look at it," he said with edged resentment. "It's not the way I see it."

"It could be a fine, brave thing you are trying to do." Donna spoke with a forthrightness that stopped him as he was turning away. "It could mean schools, and churches, and happiness for a lot of people—a better way of life for everyone here. You would fight harder if you had such things in your mind. If you set such a goal for yourself it would take you much farther than just satisfying your vengeance."

It was a strange note on which to reach an understanding, but as they stood there searching each other's eyes, something ran between them that approached an understanding.

"Maybe I need someone to point the way for me," Benton murmured cryptically.

It left Donna without an answer, and he clumped out, his spur chains jangling, and rode away. He was still angry with himself and with her when he reached the house.

"She may be right about it," he growled, "but if I don't watch my step, she'll have me standing on my head!"

CHAPTER XII

Straws in the Wind

UNOPPOSED, Ryan directed the laying of the heavy timbers across the riverbed. Very little water was coming down the Medicine. Early on Saturday morning the job was completed. Leaving a few men on guard there, he returned to the house for Benton. Hethrington had received word that his construction cars had been attached to the local freight, due in Wild Horse during the afternoon. It was his intention to start moving the equipment toward Flat Iron at once.

"We'll let the crew have dinner," Cress told him. "We can start for town then and you can be there in good time. That freight always runs late."

They had talked over how the job was to be handled. Benton knew that Kinnard had arrived in Wild Horse with several deputies. Between them and Hethrington's men, he believed there was little chance of trouble in town. Accordingly, he planned to patrol the road, feeling that if an attempt were made to wreck any of the equipment it would be tried there, sometime after night fell.

"You won't go in yourself?" the engineer asked.

"No, I better not, John. You'll have a crowd of the curious there. Just see that your men mind their own business and get on with the unloading. We may get through this without any difficulty. Kinnard will be on hand. If it's just kids we have to deal with, they'll think twice before they try to climb over him."

Passing Dry Creek that afternoon, there was no sign of Donna. She and Dr. Adams had spent the previous

day on Flat Iron. Cress had ridden with them for several hours, covering a piece of the west range without discovering anything other than a patch of rabbit grass that Ryan kept burned off.

Cress kept dropping his men as they rode along. Two miles north of town, he pulled up, himself.

"If everything goes well, you ought to see some of the wagons showing up before evening," Hethrington said, as he rode on.

With nothing to do but wait, the afternoon seemed interminable. No one passed. Cress didn't know whether to take it as a good sign or bad. Santell rode up to him about five.

"I haven't heard that freight yet," Ross said. "She must be 'way late." They had talked a few minutes when Cress cocked his head.

"There she is now! I heard her blowing—"

They listened and caught the faint blast of a whistle. Benton looked at his watch.

"It means we'll be strung out along till midnight, at least. You send word back to Ryan that as soon as it gets dark we'll move in closer to Wild Horse."

"How close?" Ross asked.

"So we can hear a gun crack."

THEY TOOK up their new positions as the twilight faded into night. It was no later than eight-thirty when the sound of scattered shots reached Benton's ears. Ryan came pounding up to him.

"Did you hear all that?" he demanded. "Fifteen to twenty shots!"

"Yeh! They sounded pretty close together—like running shots fired by one side. There wasn't any answering fire. I'll be surprised if it wasn't Babe Grinnell's bunch showing off. I suppose they raced in across the flats and let their guns talk as they swept past the station. They perhaps lost their nerve then and faded out."

"Are we holding on here?" Ryan asked, far from satisfied with Benton's explanation.

"We are for a few minutes. If we're needed there, Hethrington will get word to us."

As they waited, the sky above Wild Horse took on a red tinge. It brightened momentarily.

"Something going up in smoke," Cash growled.

"Listen," Cress cautioned. The swift drumming of shod hoofs reached them. "I don't know whether this is for us or not, but we're stopping this rider, whoever he may be. Break off a clump of sage and touch a match to it."

The dead sage flamed up all at once. The horseman came on at a driving gallop. Benton and Cash had the road blocked. They saw that the man was a stranger.

"Pull up!" Benton yelled. "Who are you?"

"I'm Hethrington's boss hostler!" the other returned excitedly. "He wants you in a hurry! The station is afire! No engine there to move our cars! They're blazing already!"

Benton had heard enough. He fired a couple shots to bring his men in and headed for town at a driving gallop. This was no time to ask questions; to get there and move those cars of tools and materials was his paramount concern. Save for the few minutes of activity every morning and afternoon when the local freights pulled in and shunted cars on the siding, there was never an engine in Wild Horse. The corral siding was several feet lower than the main track. By using a crowbar under the wheels, a car could be rolled in that direction. Cress wondered why Hethrington had failed to do it; he had men enough.

WHEN THE main street opened before him and he saw the burning railroad station and freight cars, Benton realized that the flames had made it impossible for men to reach the wheels. A heavy steam-shovel stood on the flat car nearest the station. The cab had already been destroyed.

Across the street from the tracks, several hundred persons had gathered. Benton dashed past them and reached Hethrington. The latter was

a grimy figure as he barked orders at his crew. The mules had been got out of the cars; teamsters were trying to get them hooked up to a heavy chain that had been attached to the car fartherest away from the flames.

"Where are your men?" Hethrington yelled at Cress.

"They're just behind me!" A glance told him what the engineer was trying to do to save the outfit. "Have the brakes been released?"

"Yes! When your men get here, have them do what they can to help me get these cars moving! There's giant powder enough in that box-car to blow this town off the map!"

The frightened mules were finally lined up along the chain. Their best effort failed to move the cars. The teamsters shouted and cursed at them in vain.

"We better uncouple the shovel and try to save the rest of the stuff!" Hethrington shouted at one of his foremen.

"Wait!" Benton flung himself off his horse. "We need that shovel! Here's my crew now! We'll get some ropes set if you'll hold off just a second! It may be enough help to do the trick! Get your mules straightened out!"

The roof of the station fell in, sending up a shower of sparks that sprayed both men and mules. Wild Horse had a volunteer fire company. It had failed to appear. Benton did not find the reason hard to supply.

When he told the crew what he wanted, they grasped the idea quickly.

"It'll ruin a good cow rope," Dutch complained. "This maguey set me back twenty dollars."

"I'll buy you a new one!" Cress snapped. "Get busy, all of you! A couple more minutes and it'll be too late!"

Between mules and horses, with Hethrington's gang even putting their shoulders into the job, the cars began to move.

"Hethrington!" Benton yelled. "Get some of your men ready to climb up and tighten the brake chains when this stuff rolls up to the water-tank! You, Ross! Tiny! Come with me! We'll get the spout down!"

They emptied the tank before they had the flames put out. Hethrington and the man who operated the shovel climbed up and looked it over. It appeared badly damaged to Benton. He was relieved to hear the man say: "It looks like hell, boss, but half a day's work will make it as good as ever."

"We'll unload everything right here!" Hethrington ordered. "You'll have to get some planks to reinforce the floor of this car before we touch the shovel!"

The railroad agent had run up in time to overhear the order. "I've got a through freight due here a few minutes before midnight," he protested. "You can't block the main-line!"

"Flag your freight!" Hethrington answered hotly. "This stuff comes off right here!"

He had a look at the other cars.

"How bad is it, John?" Cress asked him.

"God knows it's bad enough," the engineer answered, mopping his scorched face with a wet handkerchief. "A lot of small tools burned—the grain for the mules ruined—and two of these cars just about finished. It won't slow up the work, though; we'll go right ahead. I've got my dander up now! . . . Have you seen anything of the sheriff?"

"No. How did this thing start, anyhow?"

"IT WAS supper-time when the train pulled in. It took half an hour to get that out of the way. We started unloading the mules then. It was dark when we finished that. We had just started on the shovel when a couple dozen howling young fools raced up here from the corrals and peppered the cars with their guns. We were down on our bellies by that time. Kinnard and his deputies ran out of the station and chased after the little pups. Apparently that's what they hoped he would do. He wouldn't let me arm my men with guns, so I told them to grab up pick handles. The first thing we knew, someone was stampeding our mules

and the station was afire. It wasn't kids who did that job. If you'd been here with your bunch—"

Benton nodded. "It was a mistake to stay out there on the road. You go ahead now; we'll stick right here till you're finished."

An hour passed before Kinnard came riding up the track. His deputies were herding Babe Grinnell and Felix Hoffman along with them. Rip was furious in his quiet way.

"I'll put this pair on ice for a couple months, and some of their friends, too," he rapped. "When I saw the fire, I knew what it meant." He ran a cold eye over Babe and young Hoffman. "Had to chase them all the way to Quarter Circle. Take 'em over to the hotel and lock 'em up, Chris," he told one of his deputies. "Don't let anyone get near them."

The work went on without further violence. About eleven Cress walked over to the Morgan House with Kinnard. The shovel and a long string of loaded wagons were lined up along the street, with Flat Iron keeping an eye on them.

"You'll be moving out of town in a hour or so," the sheriff observed. "I'm tagging along with you as far as Dry Creek."

"Okay, if you think it's necessary," said Cress. "Rip—what are they saying about my plans in the Lodge?"

"That you're crazy and will go broke before you're half-way through."

"Is that what Bill Rask thinks?"

Kinnard's inscrutable eyes wrinkled into the suspicion of a smile. "It's what he's saying."

They were in the deserted dining-room of the hotel drinking a cup of warmed-up coffee when the clerk came in.

"Mrs. Harvey's here to see you, Cress," he said. "She's in the office."

"Mrs. Harvey?" Benton queried.

"Cherry," the man explained.

Kinnard called Benton back to the table. "She's undoubtedly here about Babe. It won't do any good, Cress; I'm taking that brat down to the Lodge."

"Better let me see what she wants," Benton replied.

He found Cherry seated in a chair by the window. This was the first time he had seen her since she had married Ford Harvey.

"I hope you won't misunderstand my coming to you, Cress," she said at once, with a little flutter of embarrassment. "I know the sheriff has arrested Babe. I've always taken Babe's side. But he broke his word to me this time; he promised me he'd keep out of this trouble." She hesitated, as though finding it difficult to say what was on her mind. "This may surprise you," she went on, then, "but I couldn't help feeling that, for my sake, you might think you should ask Mr. Kinnard not to press the charge against him. I—I don't want you to do that, Cress. Babe's got to be stopped, and this is the best way to do it. He and I were raised to always have a chip on our shoulder. It's all wrong, and I know it."

"I'm glad you feel that way about it, Cherry," Benton said, dissembling his amazement. He surmised that living under the same roof with old Chad Harvey explained her changed attitude. "It wouldn't do any good for me to speak to Kinnard; he's determined to teach these kids a lesson. Babe will have company in the county jail. I agree with you that it's the best place for them till this trouble is over. A month or two may see the end of it."

"I hope so," Cherry declared earnestly. "I won't keep you any longer."

CRESS walked out to the rail with her.

"I hear you and Ford are happy," he said.

"Very!"

"I'm glad," he murmured. "I can't expect you to approve what I'm doing, but it won't be my fault if it doesn't make things better for all of us."

Cherry had nothing further to say. Benton watched her ride away and then went back to Rip. Kinnard was surprised at what Cress had to tell him. "Her old man won't feel that way about it," he said. "You know how Reb will take it."

"Sure," Benton replied. "But if

there's one person in the world he'll listen to, it's Cherry. I don't doubt for a minute that he had a hand in setting this fire tonight."

Kinnard shrugged and had no comment.

The through freight had to be held up for thirty minutes before the construction cars had been unloaded and rolled down the siding. The caravan of wagons began moving out of Wild Horse at once. The pace was slow, and dawn was not far away when they reached Dry Creek. Kinnard spurred up alongside Benton.

"Looks like you'll be all right now," he said. "I'm turning back." Without even saying "So long!" he swung his horse and headed for town.

Passing the control station, Cress was surprised to see Donna standing in the doorway. He turned that way.

"We're making noise enough to wake the dead," he said. "I'm sorry—"

"Don't be absurd," she protested. "Cherry Harvey was here early this evening. She told me what had happened in Wild Horse. Are you sure you are all right?"

The note of concern in her voice quickened Benton's pulse.

"We got off pretty lucky," he said, startled to learn that she and Cherry were friends. "I thought of what you said to me while we were fighting the fire. I couldn't help wondering if schools and churches and a love-thy-neighbor policy wouldn't be wasted on a gang of men who'd come at you that way. They were risking the lives of half the people in Wild Horse. There was giant powder in one of the cars. They must have known it."

He couldn't help being bitter, but he had not intended what he said as a taunt.

"Don't take that the wrong way," he pleaded, as he saw her mouth tighten until her lips lost their long, breathless curve "I wasn't making fun of what you said. In fact, I've been trying to convince myself that it can be made a reality. But I don't believe you expect me to ride around this valley with a white flag. I tried to avoid this violence tonight; that's why I sent for the sheriff."

Donna noded. "I know it wasn't easy for you to do. Cherry told me it was the first time in fifty years that one of you Bentons had asked the law to step in. It'll have a healthy effect on this range long after this night is forgotten. I'm beginning to understand why the men who hate you most have never lost their respect for you. I—I wish I could be on your side, Cress."

HE LOOKED down at her from his saddle i the ghostly, graying dawn. Their eyes held for a moment.

"You'll have to be on my side before this is over," he murmured soberly. "I'm going to need you, Donna."

She held him back, as he was leaving.

"I wasn't going to tell you this, but I think you should know. It wasn't Wild Horse men who tried to destroy the construction train. I know Cherry saw you tonight. Perhaps this will help you to understand why."

"Good Lord!" Benton groaned. "Do you mean to tell me Babe Grinnell and those boys worked this out with Bill Rask's men?"

Donna nodded. "I have Cherry's word for it. She would know."

Cress was stunned for a moment. He realized now that Kinnard had suspected the truth. But though the folly of Babe and his companions in throwing in with Rask figuratively took his breath away, a larger consideration took possession of his racing thoughts. It was no less than that the members of the Association, the men that he had expected to fight him tooth and nail, had taken no part in the attack. He couldn't understand it, and he told Donna so.

"I know they've been meeting secretly," he said. "They had something planned to stop me. Why did they keep out of it? Was it because they knew Rask was to have a finger in it?"

Donna shook her head. "Don't you know that couldn't be the answer? They may oppose your plans, but

they despise Mr. Bill Rask. I'm sure if they had known how he was using their sons th t they would turn their guns on him. . . . Why won't you see the truth, Cress? It's plain enough."

He gazed at her blankly. "I must be blind. What are you trying to tell me, Donna?"

"That you're much closer to reaching an understanding with your neighbors than you find it possible to believe."

A great light began to break on Benton; little incidents of the past several weeks began to flow together and form a very definite pattern in his mind. It made him realize that if the feeling against him in the valley was wearing thin, that he could thank Donna for it. He was vaguely aware of Dr. Adams peering at them from his tent and of the glances his men were casting in their direction. It kept him in his saddle but his eyes were easy to read as he leaned down, a warm grin rubbing all the hardness out of his face.

"I'm just beginning to get this through my head," he murmured. "I knew you had been worming your way in to the Harveys and a few others. For a neutral, you've been awfully busy, lady!"

CHAPTER XIII

The Long Chance

THOUGH Babe Grinnell, Felix Hoffman and two others were all minors, they were sentenced to the county jail for ninety days for the malicious destruction of railroad property. Kinnard could have brought more serious charges against them, but he wanted only to teach them a lesson. For reasons best known to the district attorney, no attempt was made to bring anyone to justice for the burning of the railroad station.

As Donna had predicted, Cress found no feeling against himself over the outcome of the boys' trial. Hethrington was pushing the work at Wolf Lake. In less than three weeks the blasting had been finished and a good part of the excavation work completed. Driving the short tunnel that was to tap the lake proceeded more slowly. Benton had a dozen of his best men riding the hills. The days ran along so peacefully, however, that the endless riding became a boresome chore.

Cress went up to the lake every second day to watch the progress of the work. The fire-scarred steam-shovel was now in the canyon where he had surprised Chip Durant, cutting away one of the last barriers into the valley. Hethrington rode down from above as Benton sat watching the shovel tear away the loosened rock. He was in a jubilant mood.

"We're apparently through the tough niggerhead quartz that's been slowing us up," he said. "We've been breaking one drill after another for two days. It's been a mean job of tunnelling."

"You're still ahead of schedule, aren't you?" Cress asked.

"A little. Any mail for me that might be word from Merriweather?"

"No, and no word from the Wyoming and Western. This complete lack of interest is beginning to worry me. I don't mean only the railroads; I can't get it through my head that Rask is letting the days go by without doing something to tie us up. It's certainly not his way, John. I had a letter from Alva this morning. He's coming up next week to see what we're doing and get in some fishing and hunting. He's bringing Mrs. Linscott with him. Maybe he'll have something to tell us."

"I'll be glad to see him," Hethrington remarked. "Did you have anything in particular on your mind this morning?"

"Only that we'll be starting our fall round-up the first of the week. I've got a big crew, but I've also got a lot of range to work. I intend to keep several men on my west fence; I really don't see how I'm going to be able to spare more than three or four up here. Ryan and I were speaking about it last night."

"I don't believe we need anyone," Hethrington said. "Among these wild Irishmen of mine, there are

some cool heads. I've armed them with the guns you sent up. I think we can take care of ourselves."

It was a step that Benton hesitated to take. And yet, the situation seemed to have improved enough to warrant it.

"I could leave Santell with you," he said. "Ross would know what to do if you got in a jam. He could get word to the wagon in a hurry."

"If that will make you feel better, go ahead, Cress. But you know the hotheads in the valley have begun to cool off. Whether it's because they're all pinched for water right now or not, and I suspect that's the reason, they're not howling down this undertaking the way they were. And, of course, they'll be busy with their fall work, too."

"I'll leave Ross here," Benton insisted.

RYAN pulled out with the crew and round-up wagon early Monday morning. The yard grew quiet when they had gone. Cress was in the office, working on the ranch books, when old Curly limped in.

"That lady perfessor is here to see yuh," he announced. "She's jest druv in." He dusted a chair with his sleeve and gave the rug a quick swipe. "I'd appreciate it, if yuh'd let me know when we wuz goin' to have visitors," he grumbled.

Cress smiled to himself; Curly had never been so concerned about anyone else's coming. He knew the old man had stopped at Dry Creek several times at Donna's invitation. She had got around him quite as easily as she had Chad Harvey and a good many others.

"One particular visitor, you mean," Benton declared dryly.

"Wal, she's cut accordin' to my lines," Curly averred.

Donna drove up to the door a moment later. "Good morning, Cress!" she called. "And good morning to you, Curly!"

There was a fresh young eagerness about her that laid violent hands on Benton.

"You're out early," he said.

"Time's running out on me," she answered lightly. "I've got to make the days count. I want to spend the morning around the springs where I stopped three days ago. You're not working that range today?"

"No, we won't be down there for a week to ten days."

Donna stepped into the office for a minute. She had been on Flat Iron three or four times of late and had insisted on not taking Cress away from his work. She handed him some mimeographed pages.

"It's just some field notes and a brief summation of mine on the choke cherry that the Bureau is sending out. I'm all alone at Dry Creek now; Dr. Adams has been transferred to Red Butte." Red Butte was a Triple K stronghold, north of the Lodge. "I've been given a month to finish up here."

It was news to tighten Benton's mouth.

"I hadn't expected that," he said, not trying to dissemble his disappointment.

"Appropriations run out, Cress," she reminded him, trying to be gay about it. Benton shook his head soberly.

"I don't know how I'll get along without you. I told you once that I was going to need you before I got through. I haven't changed my mind about it. I suppose I should have realized that you wouldn't be staying here forever."

"A lot can happen in a month." There was nothing in her tone to suggest what the moment meant to her, but she could feel the pulse in her throat beating faster. "I understand the Linscotts are expected," she said, glad that she had such a safe subject to turn to.

"Tomorrow," Cress told her. "I hope you'll be able to come up while they're here. We could have dinner, or maybe a little picnic. Alva likes to cook, and he'll be bringing in some sagehen and trout."

"It sounds exciting," Donna answered. "I'll have to find time for it."

Cress walked out to the rig with her.

"I don't suppose you could discover some signs of an epidemic on this range that would compel the Bureau to keep you here indefinitely," he remarked, with a humorless smile.

"Something catching, I presume?" Donna answered in the same vein.

"Preferably."

She shook her head; she knew they were saying one thing and meaning another. "It would be difficult." Her blue eyes were sparkling. "Usually such cases are pretty far advanced before you begin to see any symptoms."

Benton went back to his desk when she had gone. If he had not known before how much she meant to him, he was aware of it now. He found himself making so many mistakes in his bookkeeping that he gave up in disgust and rang for Curly to bring up a horse.

He was in Wild Horse the next day to meet the Linscotts. Workmen were building a new station. It promised to be as ugly and inadequate as the one the fire had destroyed.

JESSIE LINSCOTT had a merry laugh that she never permitted to grow rusty from disuse. She was forty, and a grandmother, but still pointed out as one of the most attractive women in the Lodge. On the way out to the ranch, Alva let her carry the conversation. He inquired about the progress Hethrington was making, but the very care with which he avoided mentioning Rask and the Wyoming and Western warned Cress that he brought news of some unexpected development with him.

When they reached the house, they found Hethrington there, making out his payroll. Linscott shook hands with him.

"I'm glad you're here," Alva told him; "I know Cress has no secrets from you. Suppose we sit down; I've got a headache for you."

"I knew it!" Benton exclaimed. "What is it?"

"Bill is going to hit you where it'll hurt the most this time," Linscott declared bluntly. "He's been in Cheyenne for three or four days. What you've got here, Cress, is a hot potato as far as the Wyoming and Western is concerned. I can tell you now that they won't touch it. When you wrote me the conclusions the two of you had reached in regard to the railroad, I agreed with you fully. But that's all out the window now. Rask has been delivering the vote of this county to the machine for some years; no question but it gives him a drag with certain big-wigs in the state government. He's using it now for all it's worth."

"Well, let's have it!" Benton ripped out impatiently.

"He's putting pressure on the Railroad Commission to compel the Wyoming and Western to eliminate the three grade crossings in Medicine Lodge. There's good reason to believe he can force it through, and no one knows it better than the railroad company. It'll cost them a fortune. It's just a mighty smart way of putting the screws on the W. and W.; Bill's not interested in doing away with those crossings. If they want to hear the last of the agitation he's stirring up, all they've got to do is turn you down and make things as tough as possible when you try to bring in your farmers."

Cress realized this explained Bill's seeming inactivity of the past several weeks. It was a shrewd move. Undoubtedly, the Wyoming and Western would make a deal with Rask. Benton refused to get excited about it. Hethrington felt the same way.

"It sums up to about what we expected," he said. "I think we've been pretty well agreed for days that we'd have to get along without the Wyoming and Western."

Benton nodded. "This makes it just a little more definite, that's all. It doesn't make the odds against me any longer."

Linscott gazed at them incredulously and began to bristle. "Are the two of you crazy?" he demanded. "This is going to tie you into knots! You can't put this proposition over without the railroad!"

"I can't put it over without a railroad," Cress said. "I've got my eyes turned in another direction. You'll call me a fool, sitting here planning and hoping, without anything tangible to go on. But that's what I intend to do until I know I'm licked." He gave Alva a sober smile. "I didn't want to say anything about this till something had developed, but I guess you better hear it now."

What he had to say about the Union Pacific coming across the Gallatin Hills from White Sage and the letter Hethrington had sent his friend, Steve Merriweather, fell on skeptical ears. Alva shook his head almost pityingly.

"My boy, if you didn't need the U. P. so desperately, you wouldn't have the heart to sit there and tell me you seriously believe they may build into Wild Horse." Linscott shook his gray head regretfully. "I hate to see you grabbing at straws like this, Cress! You know it's a conservative railroad; to my knowledge, they're never rushed into anything like this. Your optimism is based on nothing more substantial than the fact that Hethrington has written Merriweather an enthusiastic letter. It hasn't even brought a response. You haven't any reason on earth for presuming he is interested. It's only wishful thinking, Cress!"

ALVA turned to the engineer and said:

"Don't misunderstand me, John; I'm not disparaging Steve Merriweather, nor casting any reflection on your friendship. You'll hear from him, no doubt. But you've got to admit that his answer is far more likely to be no than yes. That's all it will take, and this dream will cave in like a house of cards."

"I believe Cress and I understand perfectly," Hethrington answered good-naturedly. "We've never represented it to the other as anything more than a hope. But Steve knows I'm not in the habit of letting my enthusiasm run away with my judgment. I suspect that the reason why we haven't heard from the shrewd old fox is that he has been finding out what he can before coming to us. It won't surprise me if he turns up here one day without warning."

"If he's at all interested, certainly one of the first things he'd do would be to send someone cruising through the Gallatin Hills to make a report on how heavy a job that thirty miles of track would be," Benton argued. "You can call it what you will, Alva —maybe it's just a hunch, but I'm playing it."

"I hope you're right," Linscott gave in. "Lord knows if the U. P. wants to come in that nothing will stop them—no political frame-up, I mean. How much longer is it going to be before you bring the water down to Grand Coulee?"

"I could do that now most any time," Hethrington told him. "But I want to finish the work there before I do—some excavating and putting in the main head-gate. . . We haven't been letting the grass grow under our feet."

"It doesn't sound like you had," the lawyer declared. "I suppose all the blasting you've been doing has run all the chickens out of that country below the peaks."

"No, there's a lot of them there. If you and Mrs. Linscott want to stay up with me a day or two, I'll try to make you comfortable."

Alva thanked him and said they would go up in the morning.

"We'll all go," Cress said. "I want to see Cash and find out how the gather is coming along."

Cress rode with Jessie Linscott the next morning on the way to the lake. She asked about Donna. She found Benton so full of information about her that she smiled to herself.

"I'm glad you two have gotten along so well," she said. "A picnic would be fun, Cress, if Alva doesn't insist on singing. You tell Donna I'm anxious to see her."

Benton found the round-up work going along satisfactorily. When he got back to the house that evening, Curly stopped him as he was riding past the kitchen.

"A man by the name of Steve Merriweather here to see yuh," he announced. "Ben here most of the

day. Says yuh was aixpectin' him." The old man wagged his head approvingly. "Plays a mighty tough game o' checkers! Hardly let me have a look-in!"

It was a happy moment for Cress. He threw off the shock of it and hastened up the yard, telling himself that even an unfavorable answer would be better than the days of uncertainty he had put in for nearly three weeks.

He found Merriweather seated on the gallery, looking anything but an important official of a great railroad in his undershirt and with several days' growth of whiskers on his chin. He looked Benton over from head to toes, grinned his approval and shoved out his hand.

"I hope you don't mind my taking possession of your place," he said, laughingly. "I've been out in the sun for three days; it hit me just right to spread out on your gallery and listen to Curly's tall tales."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to greet you," said Cress. "Hethrington predicted that when you showed up you'd just walk in. I'll send a man up to let him know you have arrived."

"No, don't bother to do that," Merriweather demurred. "Curly tells me your lawyer and his wife are up there with him. I wouldn't pull him away this evening. We can talk things over and go up in the morning, if that's all right with you." He told Cress that Curly had given him a room. "I've got a bag upstairs, but I didn't unpack. I suppose it's about supper-time."

Benton grinned. "I sure hope so. I know I've got an appetite. That's Curly going out to ring the bell now."

MERRIWEATHER pulled on his shirt and stuffed it into his pants. "I'll let these whiskers go till morning," he said. "You run a big outfit here, Benton."

"Yes, I guess it rates among the biggest in the state. The water district John wrote you about isn't going to cut it down very much; I intend to run as much stock as ever."

"For a big stockman, you're taking a revolutionary step," his visitor remarked, as they walked into the dining room. "It's something that will have to be done in a good many places in Wyoming if we're ever going to get out of the rut we're in. I've been thinking along this line for years. Stock-raising will always be our most important industry, but this state is big enough, and much of it rich enough, to support ten times the population we've got today. . . Is this water project as good as John says it is?"

"Well!" Cress declared with an amused smile. "I'm prejudiced, of course. At least, it isn't any wildcat scheme. I'm putting close to a hundred thousand dollars into it. John told me what he wrote you. A letter leaves a lot to be learned, but from what little he was able to tell you, is there a chance that you might be interested?"

"You bet we're interested!" was Merriweather's emphatic answer. "If you can show me something that will justify our building into Wild Horse, we'll do it."

Benton's spirits soared. "I'm confident I can," he said with conviction. "I know that between the water we can take out of the river early in the year and what I can bring down from the lake that better than twenty thousand acres of excellent land can be irrigated. I've got a big chunk of it; Jim Cameron has the whole Little Medicine Valley. When my other neighbors see how it works, they'll be glad to let some of their range go, too."

Curly placed their supper on the table. Steve Merriweather caught the old man's eye. "Have you figured out that four-for-one move of mine yet?" he asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

"She's a hoss thief!" Curly cackled. "I reckon when I git her workin' smooth she'll jest about keep me in tobaccer this winter."

Merriweather's hearty laughter filled the room. He was beyond fifty, but his cheeks had the ruddy glow of perfect health and an untroubled mind.

"I'll take you on for another game

or two when we finish our business tonight," he promised.

Hethrington had spoken frankly in his letter of the position the Wyoming and Western had taken. Merriweather dismissed it carelessly, and surprised Benton with the admission that he had been in the Gallatin Hills for several days with a construction engineer and a surveyor. "We didn't find anything to discourage us," he said. "But I'm doing all the talking. Suppose you tell me in detail what you have in mind."

Cress welcomed the opportunity. Merriweather proved himself a good listener, dropping in only an occasional question. Several times, however, he said flatly that the feud with Rask was a personal matter and that the company would not take a hand in it.

"If this district booms, and Rask is put in the discard, we will not let it involve us," he declared. "As for money, Benton, you'll have to go it alone. We've got land of our own to sell—miles of it—given the U. P. in the original federal land grants. It's not our policy to compete with ourselves. But money won't bother you; just the announcement that we are coming in will give you all the credit you need. I'll give you an answer tomorrow, and I believe it will be yes."

When they rode east from the house in the morning Cress took a shovel along. By the time they had reached the old high dam and turned north toward Grand Coulee, he had dug several dozen test holes to show Merriweather the depth and richness of the soil. It was a convincing demonstration, and at the coulee, where concrete was being poured for the sill of the head-gate that was to control the Wolf Lake water, there was further evidence of the feasibility of the project. By evening, Merriweather had seen enough. Gathered around the fire with Linscott, Hethrington and Cress, he said, without fanfare:

"IT LOOKS all right to me; we'll go through with it. We'll run a survey this fall and start building as soon as the weather permits next spring."

"Why, that'll hold me up a full year!" Cress protested at once. "You've got two or three months of good weather left. Why let them go to waste?"

"You want people here, Benton—practical farmers, who'll stay with the land, once they come in. You can't find two-hundred and fifty to three hundred of them over night." Merriweather was matter-of-fact about it. "The thing to do is to let me go back to Cheyenne and call in the newspapermen and make an announcement of what we are going to do. Our colonization department can get busy then. We'll offer an attractive rate to White Sage. There's no reason why the people we interest should object to driving up from there."

"It won't do," Benton declared grimly. "Farmers don't look for land in the spring. I've got to have them here this fall, so they can build their homes and be all set to put in their crops when the snow goes off."

"Steve, you know he's right," Hethrington spoke up. "You can do, it if you roll up your sleeves and get busy. That survey can be run in a week. If you'll turn Swearing Mike Lafoon and a couple hundred of his Paddies loose, they'll be in Wild Horse by the end of the month."

Merriweather threw up his hands in surrender and turned to Benton. "I've known John thirty years and I've never seen him go overboard like this before. You must be pretty near all right. We won't be in Wild Horse early enough to get your beef, but you could drive to our railhead."

"I'll do it, and so will Cameron," Benton assured him.

The picnic the following evening could not have been held under more propitious circumstances. Jim Cameron had come down from Box C at Benton's request. He and Donna were as delighted as Cress at the way things had turned out. At the latter's urging, Merriweather had stayed over. He entered into the spirit of the occasion as heartily as

he did everything else. He found Donna and Jessie Linscott charming companions. Inevitably, the conversation returned to the changes coming.

"Where do you expect to find your farm families?" Donna asked Merriweather.

"Frankly, I don't know," he answered. "Iowa, perhaps."

"Northern Utah might be a better place to look. Good land is sky high there now."

"That's an excellent idea!" The railroad man turned to Cress. "Benton, would you have any objections to Mormons?"

"Why should I?" Cress asked in turn. "They're good people. We have some here now—Tom Greenway, for one. I'd welcome them with open arms."

"You can thank Dr. Collett for the idea," Merriweather told him. "I think it's a capital suggestion. I'll go down to Salt Lake in the next ten days."

It was late when Cress said good night to Donna at Dry Creek.

"I'm so happy about it all," she told him. "Nothing can stop you now, Cress. When the news of the Union Pacific breaks, you'll find Reb and the others coming to you."

"I hope you're right," he murmured. She was so close, and so lovely, that he was almost afraid to speak. His heart had been set on what he was doing, but now that the goal seemed to be in sight, success in that direction seemed strangely empty and meaningless. In a few weeks, she'd be gone. He knew he'd never find anyone to fill her place.

The desire to take her in his arms and crush her lips with his kisses began to run away with him. Donna read his thought. Panic of a sort seized her, and she sent him away. After he had gone, she came out on the porch and sat there for an hour, trying to order her thoughts.

"It means good-bye to my career," she sighed. "But if I go, I'll always regret it." Though she shook her head at her lack of decision, there was a wistful look in her eyes. "And I thought I was going to be neutral!"

CHAPTER XIV

Bright Tomorrow

THE Medicine Lodge Ledger had confined itself to ridiculing Benton's efforts, but when Steve Merriweather gave out his statement to the newspapers in Cheyenne, announcing that the Union Pacific was beginning the construction of the branch line to Wild Horse at once, and that he was already in position to state that, by winter, several hundred Mormon farmers and their families would be settled on the upper Medicine, the news was too important for the Ledger to do anything but print it.

If the Lodge was stunned, so was Wild Horse. But there the reaction was swift. Flags were run up; bunting appeared on the wooden awnings of the stores and bank. Before night fell, lots that had gone begging at two hundred dollars were snapped up at a thousand. Out in the valley, the news was received with hardly less excitement. Stockmen were busy with their fall work, but word flashed across the range that brought a score of them together at Quarter Circle that night. They knew that the coming of the U. P. meant lower freight rates, more trains, prosperity for Wild Horse. But there were even greater considerations. They knew beyond doubt that the railroad had taken this step only because Benton's scheme was an assured success; that though they had fought and reviled him, he was bringing down the water that would save them and free them forever from the domination of Bill Rask's unscrupulous clique. When Reb said, "It's up to us to go to Benton and eat gravel," no one opposed the suggestion.

Cress was still in the office when Curly stormed in and yelled at him to grab a gun. "Thar's a big bunch of men comin' up the road!" he cried. "They're ridin' like they meant business!"

Benton strapped on his gun and turned out the lamp. He felt a lit-

tle foolish when he recognized the men who rode into the yard and sensed their peaceful intentions.

"We're here to bury the hatchet," Greenway called to him. "You won't need that gun."

"Come up," Cress invited.

"I've done most of the talkin' against you," Reb said. "I reckon I should do most of the crawlin' now. It seems I've made a damned fool of myself. It's purty late to be oferin' to help you, but if there's anythin' I can do, you only have to name it. I reckon that goes for the rest of us."

The chorus of approval from the others left no doubt of it. Benton was moved, and he told them so.

"I'm glad we're standing together again," he said. "This valley is going to be a better place in which to live —better for your wives and children. They'll have some of the conveniences we had to get along without. And we won't have to be worrying from year to year if we're going to have water enough to see us through."

After the strife of the past months, with Babe and the other boys still in jail, it amazed Cress to see how little bitterness remained on either side. Tom Greenway was pleased that it was Mormons who were coming in. "They're workers, and you'll find they mind their own business," he declared.

"We're letting water into Grand Coulee tomorrow," Benton informed them, as they were leaving. "Hethrington is doing it just to test the ground for seepage. If you want to ride up in the afternoon, I'll be glad to have you."

The control gates at the tunnel that tapped the lake had long since been completed. When they were opened, the water roared down through the canyons into the coulee. Reb and the others were there to see it. Hethrington pronounced the tests satisfactory. The water was turned off again, and work proceeded on the mother ditch that was to supply Cameron's land and the district along the river. In the meantime, the surveyors began to lay the land out in sixty and one-hundred-and-twenty-acre tracts. They had just finished on Flat Iron when Merriweather arrived with a party of Mormons, big, strapping men, with soil ground into their fingers.

THEY were there two days, covering every acre that Cress and Cameron were willing to sell.

"They like it," Merriweather reported to Benton. "I'm going back to Salt Lake with them and see Bishop Freeman. I've been corresponding with him. He sent this committee up here. I think you can consider it a deal. What do you hear from Linscott?"

"Nothing for the past few days."

"You better advise him to open an office in Wild Horse," Merriweather declared, with a chuckle. "There's going to be a lot of legal work there."

Flat Iron's beef herd was almost ready for the drive. Cress arranged with Merriweather for cars.

"When will you be moving?" the latter asked.

"A week at the latest."

"We'll be ready for you. You'll find our railhead about eleven miles north of White Sage by the time you get there."

Ryan rode in several nights later. The work was going along satisfactorily, he said. Cress was riding high, and he relished being able to tell Cash that Reb and the rest had made peace with him. What he had to say regarding the visit of the Mormon committee didn't interest Ryan particularly.

"Are you making the drive with us?" Cash asked.

"Why, yes! I want to see that new railroad."

"It's going to leave the ranch deserted, Cress. I'm going to need the whole crew, putting all that stuff over a new trail. Rask will know it. If he's got something up his sleeve, he'll pull it while we're away."

"I've got him licked, and he knows it," Cress declared positively. "Hethrington's got his gang here. If he needs help, he can get it from Reb. I'll tell him so." He nodded to him-

self. "There's little Rask can do now."

"Okay, if that's how you feel about it," Ryan told him. "Like all rattlers, he's dangerous as long as there's any life left in him. Don't forget it, Cress."

Benton refused to be alarmed. He had taken Bill Rask's best and beaten him, and he intended to go on beating him. It wouldn't be long now, he told himself, before the businessmen of the Lodge would see the handwriting on the wall and turn against Rask. The human tickbirds, who long had been content to do his bidding in return for the crumbs that came their way, would be the next to desert the sinking ship. That was what Cress wanted; that and more.

When Flat Iron drove through Wild Horse, he rode at Ryan's side. He knew that Jim Cameron would be only a day or two behind him. Chad Harvey, Greenway, Grinnell — all were shipping by the U. P.

Once through the Gallatin Hills, he saw the raw new railroad there to meet them. Cars stood on a siding; shipping pens had been hurriedly knocked together. A station was to be erected. Already a signboard proclaimed that this was Gallatin. Only a few weeks back there had been nothing here but a sagebrush flat.

In view of the limited loading facilities, it should have taken Flat Iron two days to get its stuff aboard the cars. But Ryan drove the men unmercifully and by noon of the second day the job was done. He already had the wagon moving back to the ranch. Benton had only to observe the man's rocky face and sense his impatience with the sweating crew to know that Cash had not shaken off his fear that their absence had left Flat Iron exposed to danger.

DESPITE his expressed opinion to the contrary, it began to weigh heavily on Cress. He could not forget that Ryan had called the turn many times in the past.

Cash gathered the men around him for a word. "You'll be in Wild Horse fairly early this evening. If you want to take aboard a drink or two, that's all right; but that high old time you've been promising yourselves will have to be put off a week or two."

Benton caught himself unconsciously nodding his approval. He heard the men grumbling among themselves as they turned back through the hills, especially Dutch and Stony McCarran.

"They'll get over it," Ryan muttered. "I'd rather be back home and find I was mistaken about this than have something blow in our face just because we stalled around down here, or in town."

He couldn't possibly have known what was to happen at Dry Creek that evening. If he was close to the truth it was only because he was a worrying man, always looking for the worst to happen. Cherry Harvey was at the station having supper with Donna. The girls had become really fond of each other, and it was not unusual for one or the other to be found at Quarter Circle or the Dry Creek station.

When Cherry was leaving, Donna accompanied her out to her horse. As they were saying good-night, they stiffened at sight of a staggering, hulking figure floundering toward them from the direction of the river.

"It's Bat Chadron!" Cherry exclaimed. "The man who runs the saloon at the Crossing—"

"Yes," Donna answered, with a sharp intake of breath. "He's been shot! He's covered with blood!"

Bat was indeed a gory sight. His legs seemed about to buckle under him at every step. Gasping for breath, he reached the porch and grabbed an upright to support himself.

"Bat, what happened?" Cherry demanded excitedly.

The big Frenchman sat down heavily, his head drooping and his cheeks sagging. "Get Benton quick," he got out with an effort. "They're going to smash him—for keeps!"

"They?" Donna echoed. "Do you mean Bill Rask?"

Bat nodded and toppled over. The girls exchanged a frightened glance.

"Is he dead?" Cherry demanded tensely.

"I don't know," Donna answered, getting a grip on herself. "I'm not an M. D., but I'm going to have a look at him. Get a blanket, Cherry! And bring out a lamp — he's too heavy for us to move!"

She quickly ascertained that Bat was not dead. His heart was pumping blood out of a gaping hole in his chest. She called to Cherry to bring out a pair of scissors.

With Cherry holding the lamp, Donna cut away Bat's shirt.

"It must be his lungs," Cherry said in a small, tight voice.

"I think so, but I wouldn't know how serious it is." Donna ran inside, got towels and a bucket of cold water and placed a wet pack over the wound. "This must have happened some time ago," she said. "There are streaks of dried blood on his shirt. His hair is singed, too—as though he'd been in a fire."

Cherry had pulled herself together. "I told you I thought I smelled smoke soon after I got here," she said. "Rask has very likely burned him out. His foreman threatened to do it. . . Donna, how are we going to find Cress? There's no use going to Flat Iron; there's only Curly and a couple old men there."

Donna hesitated only a moment. "Cherry—are you afraid to stay here with this man? He's weak from bleeding so freely; he's only fainted. He'll be all right if you keep him quiet and put on fresh packs. I'll take your pony and go to Wild Horse. I'll find someone who'll go for Cress."

"I won't be afraid," Cherry answered. "See about a doctor, too."

Donna had been gone some minutes before Bat opened his eyes. Cherry told him they were trying to get word to Benton, and cautioned him not to attempt to speak. He had come all the way from the Crossing on foot, with his strength ebbing out of him with every step. Between the effect of the cold packs and lying still, he was improved enough in the course of an hour to insist that Cherry leave him there and go for her father and the valley men. When he told her why, she did not hesitate. Mounting Donna's horse bareback, she pounded the startled animal into a run.

BENTON was standing at the bar in the Morgan House with Ryan a few minutes after ten when Donna rushed in. Women were not seen in Wild Horse saloons, but she ignored that inhibition. The message she brought sent Ryan popping out of the barroom to round up his crew.

"Bat didn't say where Rask was going to hit us, Donna?" Cress demanded.

"No—just that it was to be 'for keeps'—"

Benton caught Uncle Luke and told him to fetch the doctor. "Dry Creek—and you'll have to hurry!" he commanded.

They were ready to ride a few minutes later.

"Go on without me," Donna urged. "And good luck to you!"

Benton reached down and caught her hand. "God bless you!" he murmured devoutly.

Though men and horses were already weary, their fibre was tough enough to take them to Dry Creek without complaint or faltering. Bat still lay on the porch, the lamp burning beside him and casting dark shadows in the deep lines of his face. Benton ran up to him.

"Are you alone here?" was his first question. "Where's Cherry?"

"I sent her for her old man—to round up some help," Bat answered. "They ought to be here directly. I didn't know when you'd be showin' up." He wet his fevered lips with his tongue. "Bill's after you this time, Benton; he's pulled men in from as far west as Red Butte—sixty or seventy of 'em. Been gatherin' at Jules' place for two, three days."

"Just give me the facts, Bat," Cress urged, "and save your strength. I've got a doctor on the way. How

did this start? How did you get shot up—and your hair burned?"

"I knew there was somethin' doin'," Chadron answered. "I did a little spyin' on 'em and got caught. They ran me back to the Crossin' and burned the place down with me inside. When I tried to bust out the back way and get a horse, they nailed me. They left me for dead. I crawled off into the brush and finally got over here."

The effort left Bat exhausted.

"Take it easy," Benton told him. "I'll wait to hear the rest of it."

"You got it all," the big Frenchman muttered. "That bunch was headin' into the Big Medicines, last I saw of 'em. Rask was ridin' with 'em."

"You don't know what their game was, Bat?"

"No. They had a pack animal with 'em—well loaded. I don't figger it was grub."

"Most likely dynamite," Ryan put in. "I knew it!"

They heard Reb and the valley men coming. There were a score of them. Medicine Valley was standing together at last. Benton told them how matters stood.

"What's your first move?" Reb growled.

"We'll start for the lake and stop at Hethrington's camp on the way up. The doctor and Wiggins will be here soon to look after Bat."

The noise of their coming aroused the construction camp. Not knowing what was up, Ross Santell had a dozen armed men lined up to meet them. Hethrington ran up to Cress, demanding an explanation.

"It'd be the tunnel they'd go after," he declared, when Benton finished. "It could be wrecked; one good heavy blast would do it!"

With a word to Ross to keep his guards posted, Cress signalled the others to follow him. Following the course of the water through the canyons was hard going for the jaded horses. Trying to avoid running into an ambush wore down the men. And yet, it was only a few minutes past midnight when they reached the lake. The tunnel was intact. Not a shot had been fired, nor had anyone caught sight or sound of a prowling foe.

REB rode up to Cress and Ryan. "What do you make of it?" he asked. "Don't seem to be anythin' wrong here."

"Bat knew what he was talking about," was Benton's pointed answer. "We'll move down the—"

"Wait!" Ryan interrupted. He turned to the men. "Let's have it quiet here a minute! I thought I heard something," he told Cress.

They listened, and the sound Cash thought he had caught was repeated, not once but in measured succession.

"That's coming across the water, from down the lake," he declared sharply.

"Yeh!" Benton rapped. "It's a sledge striking a steel drill! They're after the wall Hethrington built to block off Split Rock Creek!"

Hethrington had dammed the creek and run a wall up high enough to raise the level of Wolf Lake, as he had originally suggested. The destruction of the barrier would not greatly affect the irrigation project, but if a heavy charge were placed deep enough, it would open a fissure in the natural cup of the lake and send a torrent rushing down the eastern slope of the mountains. When it was over, Wolf Lake would be just a shallow duck pond.

Grinnell and the others who had fought the project tooth and nail expressed their wrath as violently as Benton and his crew. It meant almost as much to them now as it did to Cress. The diabolic cleverness of Rask's last desperate try to bring the scheme to naught was apparent to all. He had evidently brought his men in around the far side of the lake. They had undoubtedly been drilling into the rock for hours.

"It's going to be next to impossible to run them out of there tonight," Ryan averred soberly. "We can't come up in back of them. On this side, there's a hundred yards of open ground. They can lay out behind

that wall and mow us down like wheat."

Benton knew it was true.

"They can't stay there after daylight and live," he said. "If we can't run them out tonight, we can climb the side of this mountain and pump enough lead into them to put an end to that drilling. You men with rifles, follow me!"

The first blast from their guns brought an answering fusillade from the old mouth of the creek. With the gun flashes to give them the direction, the valley men opened up in earnest. They fired at will for a few minutes. Benton finally called a halt.

"Don't waste your cartridges," he told them. "They can't reach us up here. Let me have your rifle, Steve," he said to Hoffman. He slapped a shot at the unseen enemy. A howl of pain rewarded him. "What I thought!" he cried. "They're right down in the old creek bed. Drop half a dozen shots at them and then hold up."

The shots were fired, and the silence that followed told them the drilling had been interrupted. When it was resumed, they were able to stop it again. The performance was repeated until Benton was convinced that they had that situation in hand. He spoke to Grinnell.

"You take charge here, Reb," he said. "Ryan claims we can't come up in back of those rats, but there's no reason why we can't swing around the lake and take them on the flank. It'll take an hour. You keep your shots low. If we don't accomplish anything more, we'll keep them from running. When daylight comes, start picking them off. It ought to be as easy as stringing fish."

Flat Iron, armed with nothing heavier than six-guns, began the long swing around the lake. For a time, they rode away from the shooting, then came back toward it. Benton had his men spread out as they advanced, and under orders not to fire a shot till he gave the word.

"Rask doesn't know we're strong enough to have divided our forces," he told Ryan. "He asked for this, and I'll smash him right here."

They were moving cautiously. The moonlight was filtering through the trees. Moving blobs of shadow several hundred yards ahead of them caught their attention, and they saw that it was fully thirty men, riding closely bunched and unsuspicious of danger. At fifty yards, Flat Iron charged them. The surprise was complete. Triple K went crashing back through the brush in a hail of slugs.

"Let 'em go!" Benton yelled. "If they try it again, they'll have to come up this slope! We couldn't find a better place to stop them!"

HE REALIZED that Rask, seeing how the fight was going at the creek, had dispatched part of his men around the lake to dislodge Reb's crowd.

Tiny Starbuck snared two riderless horses. "That's two of the skunks," he growled. "I know I got Ferd Smiley, myself."

The charge was not renewed. Several hours passed. Benton could hear Grinnell's guns speaking every few minutes. Several hours passed like that, and then it was suspiciously quiet. Cress was near the shore of the lake when a dull, booming explosion rolled across the water. He knew what it meant. The water began to recede at once. He waded into it, wondering how far it would drop.

"Fell off about three feet!" Ryan called to him. "Looks like the wall went out and nothing more!"

The moon faded and out of the inky blackness that followed, the sky began to brighten along the eastern horizon. Benton gazed out over the lake and sighed his relief. Only the new wall had been destroyed.

The light strengthened quickly. Grinnell's guns began to crack with vicious monotony.

"Come on!" Benton yelled at his men. "We've waited a long time for this!"

They raced down the slope. Within ten minutes they were in sight of the ruined wall. Rask had his

horses hidden in the lee of it against Reb's fire. His men had taken what cover they could find. Now, caught in a crossfire, panic seized them. They stood off Flat Iron's first rush, but before Benton could strike again, Triple K's vaunted gunslingers grabbed their horses and fled, leaving men whose only crime was that they took their wages from Bill Rask, to carry on the fight. They had no heart for it, and when Flat Iron came in with guns blazing again they broke and fled.

Bill went with them. Anxious to be in at the finish, the valley men drove down the mountainside recklessly. Flat Iron left them behind. In a minute or two, they had split up and were pursuing the beaten enemy in a dozen different directions.

Benton saw Rask grab his saddle horn as a slug slapped into him. For a moment Cress thought the man was going down. But Bill hung on and used his spurs. Cress raced after him.

Rask knew he was being pursued. He turned several times and fired blindly without knowing who was after him. Benton began to realize that Bill was striking back toward the Peaks. It was an excellent place to shake off pursuit.

Cress lost him once for ten minutes and picked up his trail only by the blood spattered on the rocks. When he caught sight of his quarry again, Rask was dropping over the divide into the Little Medicine. Benton went after him and shortened the distance between them to a hundred yards.

The way Bill was riding now said plainly that he was a badly wounded man. He glanced back and recognized Benton. Deliberately he turned into

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a little stand of aspens. When Cress came up to him he was stretched out on the ground, his right arm under his leg.

At first, Benton believed the man was dead. He was about to swing down when he saw Rask's right arm come up. Cress fired. It wasn't what he wanted; this was not the end he had planned for Bill Rask.

He kicked the gun out of Bill's hand and saw that he was still breathing. Stony McCarran and half a dozen others found him there. They carried the boss of Triple K to Jim Cameron's house. Rask was unconscious, but he clung tenaciously to the faint spark of life that still burned in him.

Benton went out in the yard and waited. Every few minutes someone rode in until they were all there. Ryan was one of the last to come.

"It'll take that outfit sometime to get done with its burying and doctoring," he said grimly. "Did you know Kinnard's up here?"

"No."

"Cherry sent for him. He'll be showing up."

A MAN had been sent to Dry Creek to fetch the doctor. Rask was still breathing when the latter arrived. The sheriff was with the doctor. Rip and Benton walked down to the corrals.

"I don't know how good a doctor Sweetzer is, but I hope he's able to pull Rask through," Cress said, his mouth hard and implacable. "I don't want him to go like this, Rip; I want him to be a long time paying for what he did to my father an me."

"This will be the best way," Kinnard insisted. "Bill's been licked for some time. He wasn't smart. A hog never is. Twenty years ago, he might have got away with it. The thing for you to do is to wash all this out of your mind."

Rask died about five o'clock. The exodus from Box C began at once. Benton had little to say as he rode home. The damage at the lake could be repaired after the rest of the work had been completed. He understood from some of his men that Hethrington was up there, looking things over.

"We'll have to do something for Bat," he told Cash. "Doc says he'll be laid up a long time. I want you to go in to town tomorrow and see how he's fixed up for money. Tell him I'll be in later."

Donna had been pacing the gallery at Flat Iron for hours. When Cress rode into the yard with the men, she ran down the steps to greet him. He saw her coming and slipped out of his saddle. Oblivious to the men, she rushed into his arms.

"Cress!" she cried. "I've died a thousand times today, thinking you would never be coming! You're not hurt, darling?"

He crushed her close, not even trying to answer, and kissed her mouth.

Uncle Luke started a cheer that the others joined. Benton accepted it for what he knew it was.

"It seems they approve of you, Donna," he said.

"And of you," she answered.

Benton led the way into the office. He spoke briefly about what had happened since he had left her in Wild Horse. Donna was smiling through her tears as she raised her face to him.

"I guess you know," he murmured. "I've told you before that I needed you. It isn't a biologist I need, Donna. I'm never going to let you go!"

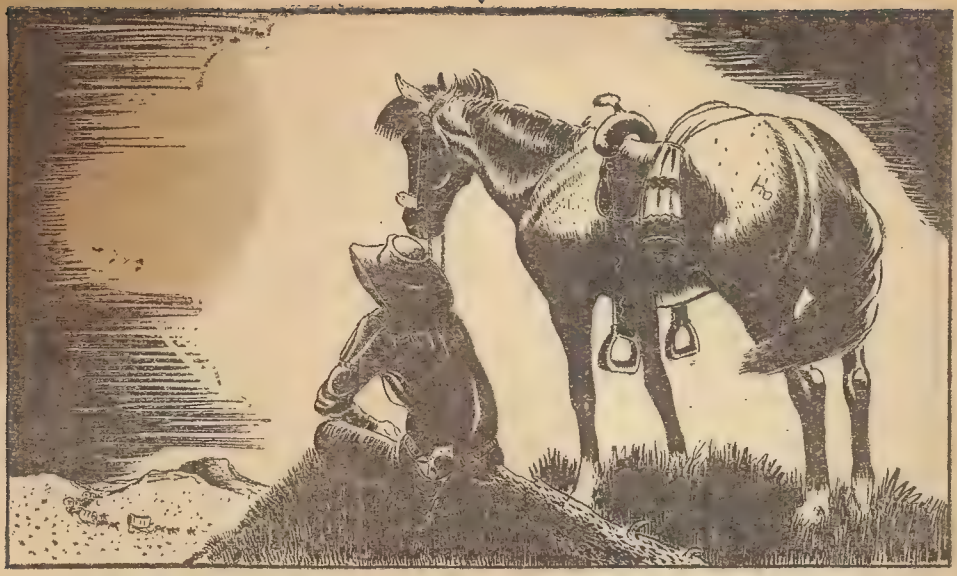
"Please never, Cress," she murmured. "I've had this out with myself. I knew I needed you more than you'll ever need me—that I couldn't go." She smiled at him wistfully. "I want to be here when Benton County is born, don't I?"

"Benton County?"

"Surely, you won't be satisfied with anything less than that? It may take you a year or two but you'll see that Box Elder is divided." Her tone was light and gay, but she was not jesting.

Cress held her a little closer. "With you to show me the way, maybe we can do it. . . . Benton County!" he murmured. "The old man would surely like it."

THE END



TRAIL AND SADDLE

Fact Articles of the Old West

PEGLEG OF THE OWL HOOT ★ ★ ★

★ ★ ★ **By Kenneth P. Wood**

"PEGLEG BILL" ELDRIDGE was a bad hombre—rustler, stage robber, horse thief, and all-around disturber of the peace. After shooting up a town of an afternoon, he was likely to be heard of the next day at a distance of fifty miles away, holding up a stagecoach, or running off some choice bit of horseflesh that took his fancy. From the Butte country to the Border his unsavory fame extended, and the authorities of two States had long desired an interview with him, a fact of which Pegleg was not in ignorance, for after each raiding foray he quickly retreated to an isolated wakiup in the mountains.

Pegleg Eldridge was a product of that swashbuckling era succeeding the Civil War. During the readjustment period after that strife the great herds of the Southwest were neglected to such an extent that thousands of cattle grew to maturity without ear-mark or brand to identify their owner. A good mount of horses, a rope and a running iron in the hands of an active man, were better than financial capital. The good old days when a freebooter could brand fifteen calves annually—all better than yearlings—to every cow he owned are looked back upon to this day, from cattle king to the humblest of the craft, in pleasant reminiscence.

Pegleg was of that time, and when conditions changed, he failed to change with them. It was the reason that, under the new order of things, he frequently got his brand on some other man's calf. This resulted in his losing a leg from a gun shot wound at the hands of the man he had thus outraged. Worse, it made his identification easy and branded him for all times as a cattle thief, with every man's hand against him.

Despite his physical handicap he could fork a kak with the best, a

specially made leather boot for his wooden leg taking the place of a stirrup on the off side of his saddle. At one time he was reputed to be the surest shot and the quickest on the draw in the Panhandle. It is said that he could whip out his gun, shoot from the hip and empty its six chambers in five seconds, making every bullet tell. In addition he was ambidextrous and could fan a six-shooter to perfection with either hand. Other than this, no tinge of cavalierish color attended his exploits, for this consummate villian was a crafty, evil brute, a cold-blooded killer. If he had ever done a kind or generous deed, it never came to light.

On the night of September 8, 1881, Pegleg Bill and three companions crouched in the shadows of the huge water tank near the tracks of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad at Texas Creek. All four men were roughly dressed, though well booted and spurred. Eldridge and his pal, Pat Cornish, packed a brace of six-guns while the others carried Winchester rifles. In front of them on the ground were four grain sacks with small eye-holes cut in the sides, and several feet away lay two saddle-bags stuffed with dynamite. A quarter of a mile beyond their horses were picketed in a greasewood thicket. The place was only a watering stop on the railroad line, and therefore an inviting spot for a holdup.

Surrounded by the vastness of the front range of the Rockies, Pegleg and his little gang of desperadoes selected this lonely way station as best fitting for the transaction in hand. To the southwest lay the Sangre de Cristo range, in which the quartette had rendezvoused and planned the robbery. Farther to the southwest rose the snow-capped peaks of the Continental Divide, in whose silent solitude an army might have taken refuge and hidden without detection. It was inviting country to the road-agent and rustler. These mountains, where the owl hooted and the coyote howled, offered retreats that had never known the tread of human footsteps. Encouraged by the thought that pursuit would be almost an impossibility, the outlaws laid their plans and executed them without a single hitch.

ABOUT ten o'clock, a speck of light appeared on the eastern horizon where the railway tracks came together. Without a word the men adjusted the grain bags over their heads and flattened themselves in a shallow gully. The dot of light grew into a glaring, white eye, and the eastern overland express slowed up, and with a groan stopped at the water tank. Like silent specters the four hooded figures rose quickly and advanced. Each followed his instructions to the letter. Two of the bandits dashed for the coaches to cover the passengers, while Pat Cornish roughly ordered engineer and fireman to climb up on the tender, face about and reach for the stars —an order instantly obeyed — for sudden death was aimed in their direction. Meanwhile, Pegleg Eldridge ran to the express car and knocked on the door with the handle of one of his six-shooters.

"Who's there?" came a voice from within. "What do you want?"

"Open the door an' I'll tell yuh," snapped the one-legged man. "An' make it quick, too!"

"Who are you, anyway?" demanded the voice.

"Neb' mind who I am. I want that box of yellow bullion yuh're bringin' from the smelters. If yuh don't toss it out, I've got enough dynamite here to blow yuh and yore whole damn car plum' to hell. Sabe? Chuck it out, pronto, or I'll turn the fireworks loose!"

There was a movement inside the car but no answer. For a few seconds Eldridge crouched at the side of the big door, his weaving weapons covering it. Now he stood upright and stepped back a few paces.

"Look-a here, you in there," he yelled through his hood, "if that stuff ain't out here when I count ten, I'm gonna blast it out!"

"One—two—three—four. . ."

There was another movement and

quick shuffling inside the baggage car, but no word was spoken.

"Five—six—seven—eight. . ."

"Hold on there—here it is," interrupted the voice from inside the car. The door slid open several feet and a large iron-bound box was pushed out and fell with a dull thud to the ground, then the door shut with a bang. Pegleg, his six-guns still pointing at the door did not move, but called to his companions: "Okay, boys, let 'er go!" Again the bandits played their parts, slowly withdrawing with leveled guns. There was scarcely any excitement among the passengers and crew, so quickly was it over. The engineer slid down into the cab, pulled open the throttle and the ponderous train lunged forward with a roar into the night.

While the haul was a good one, the express company never divulged to the public the actual value of that box of golden ingots which the highwaymen hastened to the greasewood thicket to blast open. The loot was quickly divided four ways on the spot, each portion packed in one of the grain bags and lashed behind the cantel of a saddle, then the four owl-hooters melted into the mountains.

Within the hour, however, the telegraph wires from the next station were humming with the news to headquarters, and when it was disclosed that the leader of the holdup men had a wooden leg, the law knew on whom to place its finger. In another half hour, United States Marshal Harry Burdette, whose success in pursuing criminals was not bounded by the State in which he lived, took up his warbag, hurriedly gathered a posse of six deputies and boarded a specially chartered train for the nearest station to the depredation.

DURING the night the few homesteaders who resided in the vicinity of the station were kept busy getting together saddle horses for the marshal's party. This was not easily done, as there were few mounts on hand, while practically all the horses of nearby ranches had been turned loose in the open range for the night. However, upon arrival, Marshal Burdette and his men were supplied with the best available horseflesh the community had to offer.

Day was breaking when the posse reached the deserted water tank. The marshal lost no time in circling about until the trail of the train robbers was picked up, which started from the shattered remains of the bullion box in the wooded thicket. Unfortunately several hours were lost by the pursuing party as they had to await the arrival of pack animals, so when the trail was taken up in earnest they were at least twelve hours behind the fugitives. But little did Burdette realize that those wily bandits would lead him on a merry chase for nearly two months through the mountains and gorges.

The first night the posse reached the narrow plateau that forms the crest of the Sangre de Cristo range. Here they made their first halt. The necessary resting of his sweat-soaked horse was very apparent to the marshal, though he would have gladly pushed on. The only halt he could expect of the outlaws was to likewise save their horses, which were obviously better than his, so he must do the same. Forcing a tired mount an extra hour has left many a thoughtless rider afoot.

It was ten days later before the posse picked up a fresh sign, for Pegleg's little band doubled and redoubled through the mountain fastness. A narrow gulch in which they had camped showed evidences of where the horses had been picketed for the night, and where men and beasts had slept. From this temporary camp-site the trackers moved down the opposite slope toward the San Juan River, and into New Mexico. From the mountainside a few blurred ranches were visible far out on the mesa, but in all instances they were carefully avoided by the fugitives.

Three weeks later Harry Burdette received his first encouraging piece of information from a lone Mexican sheepherder beyond the Divide.

(Continued On Page 97)

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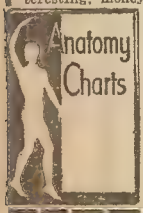

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Pegleg of the Owl Hoot

(Continued From Page 95)

"Yesterday morning," said the sheepman, "shortly after daybreak, four men rode into my camp and asked for food for breakfast. I gave them all the coffee I could spare, but having no meat on hand, they tried to buy a lamb, which I have no right to sell. After drinking the coffee they offered me money, but I refused it. On leaving, the leader, a one-legged dirty son, rode into my flock and killed a ewe which he snatched up with him as he galloped away after the others."

From the shepherd Burdette received a good description of all the men, the color and condition of their horses, and the amount of saddle-luggage they packed.

With unremitting energy the pursuers pushed on through country which was principally Mexican, and even the swarthy aliens the bandits avoided as much as possible. At a little store adjoining a rather pretentious rancho, a second description of three of the men was obtained—but no Pegleg. He was so indelibly marked that he was crafty enough to remain in the back trails, out of sight of so public a place. The three others, the marshal had learned, bought some provisions and several fresh horses. The outlaws, he was told, were very rough though liberal in their dealings, but extremely exacting as to the quality of horseflesh they purchased.

Close upon the heels of the fugitives several days later the posse galloped into the old town of Santa Fe, a stamping-ground of hard gamblers, hard drinkers, and still harder fighters. Here the officer was informed that three men, fitting the description, had spent a wild night and were reckless patrons of the many gaming houses the town boasted. But like the stars, they had vanished with the dawn.

AT NO time in the next two weeks did the hunters come within two days of their quarry. This was owing to the fact that the latter traveled almost continuously. Then suddenly the bandits doubled back, heading almost due east toward the

(Continued On Page 98)

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(Continued From Page 97)

Panhandle. Thither went the tireless marshal, toward the owlhooters' old haunts—down between the two Canadians. But Pegleg's day was waning; he could not hold out forever against the indomitable Burdette.

One morning just as the sun raised its fiery eye above the level of a little desert sink in the Staked Plain, the outlaws reached a favorite waterhole. After filling their canteens, they parted company, two of them striking out for the north, leaving Pegleg Eldridge alone with Pat Cornish. Pegleg prepared for a short rest and commenced to unsaddle the horses, while Cornish proceeded to open his bag of ill-gotten wealth, and carefully weigh each yellow ingot one by one in his hand. But the one-legged man's glutted imagination also reeled with the delirious madness of gold, and between slitted eyes he watched the other gloat over the precious products of the smelter. It annoyed him so he could scarcely build a fire.

The thought of his share of the spoils commenced to aggravate him. It seemed very insignificant compared to Cornish's portion. Somehow the value of it figured up differently; it refused to fill his mind's eye. Pegleg felt a sense of loss, a mental pain. As he brooded, it fretted, stung, maddened him and a fleeting impulse while he watched his companion, became a definite, dominating, resistless purpose.

Without a word Eldridge made a pot of coffee and warmed a can of beans. He helped himself generously to both and pushed the remainder toward Cornish. From the corner of his eye he furtively watched every move of the other man. Turning his back he drew one of his six-shooters and toyed nervously with it. The acoustics of the desert are remarkable, so he put the weapon back into its holster. Not until Cornish had finished his sorry meal did Eldridge speak. In a voice velvet and persuasive he suggested that Cornish should turn in and avail himself of a little much-needed sleep while he kept a look out. The un-

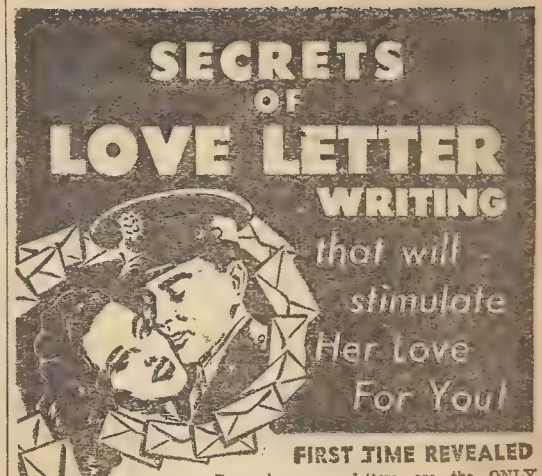
suspecting and travel-weary partner readily agreed to the proposal.

A mocking smile played across Pegleg's lips as the other relaxed in the sparse shade of a mesquite. Ten minutes later the outlaw leader wriggled noiselessly on all fours toward the recumbent figure. A few feet from the sleeper he paused, unsheathed a bowie knife and, like an animal, sprang for the throat. There was no struggle, no outcry. It was all over too soon for that. He drew back cowering, yet gazing with fascination at the murdered man that now lay in the shadow of the bush. Then the instinctive human fear of the dead possessed him and he sprang to his feet and ran to the only living things in that lifeless place—the horses. Feverishly he saddled his mount. Its mate whinned expectantly, but Pegleg did not heed it. Strapping the two unwieldy bags of bullion to the saddle, he quickly mounted and lashed his horse into a mad gallop.

When Burdette arrived at the water-hole, the first thing he saw was the corpse of the murdered man whose throat had been slit. Sending his entire posse to follow the tracks of the two bandits who had headed north, the officer wheeled about and took up single-handed, the trail made by Pegleg's galloping horse. The experienced eye of the marshal told him the whole story, and it was a cold-blooded murderer now he had to hunt down.

TWO weeks later at a town in the Chickasaw Nation, there was an annual fair and horse race, a gala event of considerable importance in that part of the country. The residents for miles around gathered to witness, and gayly bedecked Indian bucks rubbed shoulders with swaggering cowpunchers in new Stetsons and burnished spurs. Ranchers and horse owners were "shooting the works" on the entries, while the Indians wagered their live stock freely. As the race was being run and every eye centered on the outcome, a dust-laden stranger with a silver star under his lapel, pushed a .45 against

(Continued On Page 100)



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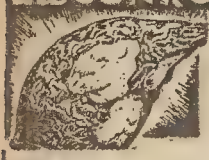

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(Continued From Page 99)

the back of a very interested spectator with a wooden leg. To the cock of a loaded revolver rang out the command: "Put 'em way up high, long rider! One false move and it's your last!"

A quick-shot glance over the shoulder into the little black eye of a Colt required no further comment. There was no alternative. As Pegleg's hands slowly ascended skyward, steel handcuffs quickly snapped about his wrists. His guns were removed, and he was escorted to waiting horses that conveyed him to his cache where the marshal forced him to uncover his part of the loot including Cornish's portion which he had confiscated.

En route for trial on the railroad train the marshal was able to give Pegleg Bill a good part of his past history. But when he attempted to draw him out as to the murder of Pat Cornish, and the two accomplices who had struck out for the north, Eldridge was very innocent of everything.

The outlaw leader was tried and convicted of murder and train robbery in a Federal Court in Colorado. He went "over the road" for a term of years far beyond the lease of his natural life. When within an hour's ride of the penitentiary—his living grave—Pegleg Eldridge raised his manacled hands, and twisting from the blue flannel shirt which he wore, a large pearl button, said to the deputy in charge:

"Will yuh please take this here button an' give it with my compliments to Mr. Harry Burdette, an' say to that human bloodhound that I didn't anticipate his catchin' up with me. If I had, it would 'a' saved yuh this trip. He might 'a' got me, but I wouldn't 'a' needed a trial when he did."

THE END

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By Martin Wolsey

Jeff Dacey always left a trail which any man could follow if he knew where to look. And that trail could hang deadwood on a killer!

STEVE DACEY reined his sorrel to a halt and stood surveying the Lazy Y spread. As much as he could see of it pleased him—the well-built main house, the sturdy wooden rails encircling the corral, the practically new bunkhouse. He remembered standing here ten years ago with his brother, Jeff. They were just a couple of buttons then, but they'd vowed that if ever the outfit were for sale, they'd buy it. And now that chance had come.

Steve jogged up to the ranch house just as old Rip Colby, ramrod of the Lazy Y, hobbled out the doorway.

"Well, well, you old mossyhorn!" Steve greeted as he swung out of the saddle. "So after all these years you're finally letting me buy the spread. I knew I'd get it from you some time." Steve's browned face creased into a good-natured grin; his flame-blue eyes kidded the oldster.

"Yep, I reckon so," Rip mused, scratching his white head embarrassedly. "You always wanted it since you were a couple of green younkers, didn't you?" His faded eyes roved tenderly over the ranch. "Guess I'm 'bout ready to cash in. The old ticker, you know," he added with an indifferent little gesture towards his heart.

"I wanted you rannies to be the new ramrods though, seein' as how you had your eye on it. Have to git used to it. Ain't like Texas, you know."

"Won't take us long," Steve asserted confidently. "Say, where's Jeff?"

(Continued On Page 102)

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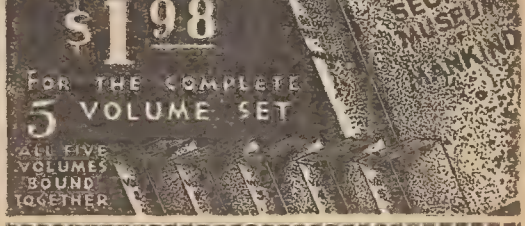

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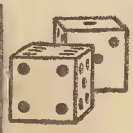

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(Continued From Page 101)

The jasper's colorless eyes looked quizzical; his nose screwed up in surprise. "Jeff? He ain't here?"

Steve gave a short warm laugh. "C'mon, old-timer, I know you like to have your little jokes now and then, but I ain't got much time. Got to get into town for something. Let's get Jeff."

"I tell you Jeff ain't here. He never was," Rip insisted in a cracked voice he was trying hard to make emphatic.

Steve's eyes bored into the oldster's, and he realized Rip was serious. "But Jeff was supposed to be here a week ago with five thousand dollars for the spread. I was to meet him here today with my share."

Rip shook his head. "Ain't here. Mebbe somethin' held him up." His lined old face looked into Steve's with a concern he couldn't hide. "Couldn't be nothin' else," he added lamely.

Steve didn't answer. But his face stiffened into a cold mask, and his eyes turned an ice-blue. Tightening his gun-belt, he strode toward his horse. "I'm goin' out to find Jeff," he rapped. "And if anything's happened—"

"Where you goin' to find him?" Rip interrupted.

"I got a note from Jeff last week, post-marked Peak Town. That's where I'm headin' for."

"Go easy, son," Rip called after him. But Steve didn't hear him. He had spurred his horse and was pounding down the road to Peak Town. Rip stood staring after his dust.

AFTER an hour's inquiry around Peak Town—at the hotel, the restaurant, the livery stables, the general store, and even the sheriff's, Steve Dacey was ready to believe the worst. Not a soul in Peak Town had seen or heard of Jeff Dacey.

He had disappeared into a dust cloud, as it were, vanished like a mirage in the desert. But Steve was sure that Jeff would never have gone anywhere with that five thousand cached on him—that is, nowhere but to the Lazy Y. He had come to

Peak Town, but had never left; that was the only explanation.

Steve sat down on the steps of the general store to do some figuring. He tried to imagine, from all he knew about Jeff, just what Jeff would do when he blew into a town. He recalled his brother's face—good-natured, generous, lean, almost the spittin' image of Steve—but full of the devil. Jeff liked a fling now and then—a harmless, little fling—a few drinks, mebbe a game of poker, a pretty face....

Steve's eyes suddenly lit up. A smile pulled at his lips as a plan brewed at the back of his mind. He sat for a few more moments thinking, the same expression on his face; then slowly and deliberately, he strode down the street.

Dacey pushed the batwings of the Deuces Wild Saloon open with his elbows. He felt all eyes turn on him as he sauntered to the bar. There was something about his granite jaw and sinuous movements that drew people to him like a magnet.

"Whisky," he ordered, slapping a coin on the bar. The barkeep took the money, looked up indifferently.

Steve's eyes narrowed into the bartender's. "Anything new since I was here last week?" he asked and watched for the man's reaction.

The barkeep's heavy-jowled face remained expressionless. "You must be loco, cowboy. I ain't never seen you before."

Steve grabbed the bartender's wrist. "Mebbe you seen a cowpoke that looks like me though—named Dacey?"

"Ain't seen no strangers," the barkeep growled. "Don't know nothin' about it."

Steve released his wrist. Then, to the barkeep's astonishment, he slowly inched down the bar, closely examining it as he moved. In a few moments he was back to where he'd started from. He gave a wry smile. "Just lookin' for somethin'," he assured the wide-eyed man.

"WHO'S boss here?" Steve demanded suddenly of the barkeep. "I want to talk to him."

(Continued On Page 104)

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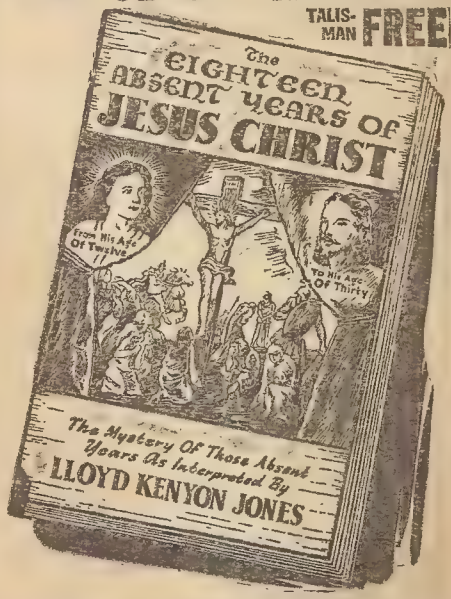
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(Continued From Page 103)

He took out his gun and nonchalantly started shining it with a big red kerchief.

The barkeep's eyes popped. "Don't advise you to start no trouble with Deuce—"

"Deuce—Deuce Tanner?" Steve interrupted, surprised.

"The same, ranny. I warn you."

The name was familiar to Steve. Deuce Tanner's reputation for ruthless and numberless killings and card sharpings had preceded him even to Texas. Steve had heard incredible stories of gun-swift, courageous men who had set out to kill the high-stakes tinhorn, and had never returned from Peak Town. But Steve's face betrayed no fear as he said stonily: "Tell your boss I want to see him."

The bartender scurried off and disappeared into a back door like a gopher. Steve swallowed his whisky in one long gulp, and glimpsed, over the top of his glass, the stocky figure of the barkeep emerging from the back room. Behind him came Deuce Tanner.

Steve was taken aback. He had expected someone hulking and powerful. The man who faced him now was a half-pint, not more than a five-footer and frail-looking to boot. But scrutinizing the gambler's face, Steve saw hardness etched in every line and muscle, ruthlessness in every gesture.

A quirly hung out of the side of Deuce's thin lips; his hair was slick as snakeskin. He wore a tight-fitting black suit over a bright plaid vest. His hand-tooled boots looked expensive. He seemed to pack no guns—or none that Steve could see.

"Lookin' for me?" he asked, the quirly still in his lips, smoke swirling past his eyes as he appraised Steve.

"Lookin' for a cowpoke named Jeff Dacey. I got reason to believe he stopped in here a week ago."

Tanner leaned against the bar, stared out vacantly over the saloon. "Don't know him."

"You sure?"

Deuce Tanner slowly turned his tar-black eyes on Steve. He blew a stream of blue smoke into the cowpoke's face. "Listen, stranger, no-

body contradicts Deuce Tanner, savvy?" He stepped on the butt of his quirly and turned away from Steve. "I'm busy, stranger. And this ain't no lost and found office." He strolled away. Then in a quiet, ominous voice, he said over his shoulder: "We don't like strangers in the Deuces Wild, do we, boys?" And his glance nudged the hombers in the room.

Hostile eyes stared at Steve. He saw hands drop to their holsters.

"Cowpunch can buy a whisky, can't he?" Steve asked smiling.

Deuce didn't answer. He went to the back of the gambling-saloon, weaved in and out among the crowd. Steve watched him through the corner of his eye, caught him whispering to a slim burnette. Then he disappeared into his office again.

STEVE was discouraged. So far there was nothing that pointed to Jeff's whereabouts. But he had to get to the bottom of this mystery; had to carry through his plan, anyway.

He sidled down to the end of the bar, near the spittoon, and ordered a bottle of red-eye. He was aware of a couple of Tanner's partners stealthily watching him. He poured himself a whisky, pretended to drink it, then surreptitiously dumped it into the spittoon. He kept this up; took his time. An hour passed. The gunslicks still watched him.

He began to blubber, sing drunkenly. He swayed down to the other end of the bar and slobbered, "Gimme another bottle. I got plenty of money. Here, I'll show you."

He dove awkwardly for his pocket, drew out a wad of bills; threw one at the barkeep, and grabbed his second whisky bottle. The long mirror topping the bar showed him the greedy faces of Tanner's henchmen signaling to each other. Then he noticed one disappear into Deuce's office.

STEVE stumbled over to the empty card table at the back of the long room. Then suddenly he lurched. His palms hit the card table. It overturned with a loud

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 105)

crash. Steve fell with it, his feet tangled in the table's legs, his arms humorously embracing the stem. He sat there, in a heap, looking bleary-eyed.

Hoarse laughter guffawed through the saloon. The commotion brought Tanner's gunmen to Steve's side. "Can't hold his red-eye," one of them said winking. "Get him his bottle, Jake."

They dumped him into a chair. He sagged over the small table, closed his hands over the bottle, noticing they still kept their eyes on him.

Steve realized he was in a spot now; he was getting deeper and deeper into something he mightn't be able to crawl out from so easily. Deuce Tanner was no blank cartridge. He was known to kill a man merely because he didn't like his face; a roll of bills was sure justification for murder.

Suddenly Steve noticed the brunette who Deuce had whispered to coming toward his table. He eyed her warily, still pretending he was stewed.

"Hello, stranger," she purred, seating herself opposite him.

Steve watched the girl carefully through half-closed eyes. She obviously worked for Deuce, yet there was something clean and wholesome-looking about her that seemed oddly out of place in a gambling saloon.

He mumbled a greeting, then lapsed into silence, waiting for her to make the next move.

Clumsily he reached into his pocket for a quirly, dragged out some makin's, dumped them on the table before him. A tiny, whittled, wooden cowboy accidentally clattered to the table with the makin's.

The girl stared at it. "Cute, ain't it"? Steve remarked. "Someone I know makes 'em."

She seemed unable to tear her eyes away from the little wooden novelty. Finally she turned to Steve, looked into his eyes with a tender concern he couldn't fathom.

"What's your name, ranny?" she asked softly.

"Did Deuce ask you to find that out?" he gritted at her.

Her face went white. She turned her eyes away from him, nervously bit into her lower lip. Then suddenly she leaned over the table close to him. "Listen carefully," she whispered.

She sneaked a frightened look over to Tanner's henchmen. "Don't ask any questions, ranny. Just take my advice and get out of here."

"Why?" Steve shot at her. "What did Deuce tell you before?"

"I can't tell you any more than I have. Better leave."

STEVE studied the girl carefully through drooping, drunken lids. She looked trustworthy. And then suddenly he saw it—a little packet of powder hidden in her handkerchief—powder to knock him out cold, no doubt. Resentment and confusion rushed through him at once. But he pretended he'd seen nothing. He talked drunkenly, kept one eye on the girl's hands. And then, thinking she had diverted his attention, she nimbly opened the packet. But so quick was the motion that Steve couldn't be sure whether she'd slipped the powder into the drink, or whether she'd only pretended to.

"Here, ranny," she said in a loud voice. "Here—have a drink on the house." She pushed the glass towards him.

He took it; lifted it to his lips. He pretended to take a sip of it; let the rest dribble down his chin. He didn't finish the drink, but slowly set the half-full glass back on the table. Then he flopped forward, and lay still on the table.

A few moments later he heard the girl get up. He waited tensely for Deuce's next move. It came sooner than he'd expected. He heard two pairs of boots clicking across the hardwood floor—Tanner's gunhawks! So the girl had been in on the plan. She must have dropped that powder into his drink.

The men were beside him now; he could hear them whispering. They lifted him under the armpits and dragged him across the saloon floor. Then he heard a door bang shut.

"Drop him," commanded an oily,

(Continued On Page 108)

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(Continued From Page 107)

low-pitched voice that Steve recognized as Tanner's.

Steve hit the floor with a thud. A boot jabbed viciously into his ribs, and a flash of pain seared through his side. He cursed to himself, but didn't flinch.

"Take his gun," Deuce ordered. "We can always use another one."

Steve's courage sank as he felt his .45 being lifted from its holster. But it was Deuce's next words that sent a pang like a knife to his heart.

"Dump him next to his brother's bones, Jake—out on Ghost Gulch," Deuce jeered. "Together in death as in life—very touching." The man named Jake on Steve's left, cackled.

A HOT wave of fury burned through Steve, mixed with a tender, lost feeling when he thought of generous, high-spirited Jeff. His brain worked frantically. He'd planned on getting in here—but how could he get out now that he knew Deuce had killed his brother? Every nerve in his body seemed suddenly afire, as he heard Deuce say, "Okay, get the dinero!"

Steve waited for Tanner's men to get close enough. He felt their whisky breath as they reached for his roll.

Then, like a shot, he jackknifed up, caught Jake in the stomach with the full force of his feet. Simultaneously, his arm lashed out, clipped the other henchman in the jaw, sent him sprawling in to Deuce Tanner. They both went to the floor in a heap of arms and legs.

Before they could recover from shock, Steve sprang to his feet, kicked his .45 out of Jake's hand. As Steve reached for it, flame blurted from the Colt at Jake's holster.

The cowboy triggered. Satisfaction swelled in him as he bedded Jake down, saw a pool of blood spread over the gunman's chest.

He whirled then, just as the second gunslick was about to ram his skull in with a pistol. Steve hopped back, hammered lead into the man's wrist, but not before a bullet slashed across Steve's cheek.

At that moment, Deuce, tiny and light-footed, bolted to his desk, pocketed something from the bottom drawer.

Steve saw him through blurred vision. Bluffing, he made a dash for Deuce. His voice managed to be steady as he warned, "Reach, tinhorn."

Tanner's hands climbed to above his head. Steve inched up to him, gun leveled at the gambler's heart. He dipped his hand into Deuce's pocket and came up with a heavy wallet—Jeff's hand-tooled leather wallet!

That moment Deuce lammed to the door. Steve's .45 yammered, but his spinning head had distorted his vision. The bullet whammed into the wooden door, and the tinhorn escaped.

Steve's will and the memory of his brother's killing gave him strength. He yanked the door open, his head clearing as determination welled back into him. Deuce was standing at the bar. A derringer magically filled the gambler's hand. Powder roared through the saloon; smoke fanned from both ends of the room.

In the empty silence that followed, a groan spilled from Deuce Tanner's throat. Blood dropped from the hand that held the derringer—the hand that was quick, but not quick enough.

TEN minutes later the sheriff bustled into the Deuces Wild Saloon, found Deuce Tanner and his hireling grotesquely propped up on top of the bar. A sardonic stranger sat at a table, his gun cocked at them. Around his shoulder was tied a blue taffeta makeshift bandage.

"What's coming off here?" asked the sheriff.

"You can arrest Deuce Tanner for the murder of my brother, Jeff Dacey!" Steve said. And then pointing to the red-faced hireling beside Tanner, he added, "And this coyote, too."

The gunman's weasel features worked as he shouted: "I didn't do nothing. Deuce killed him—while he was going out to the Lazy Y, then

(Continued On Page 110)

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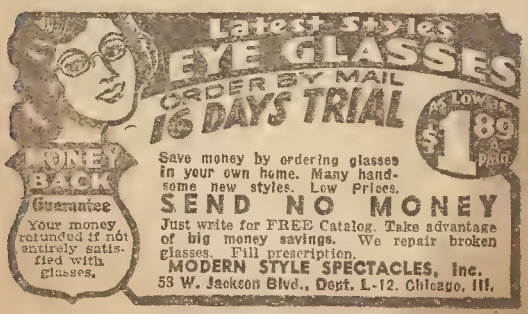
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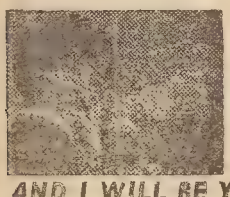

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(Continued From Page 109)

buried him out on Ghost Gulch. All I did was get the cowpoke drunk."

"Thanks for puttin' us straight," the sheriff said as he clicked handcuffs over Tanner's fists and those of his partner. "Guess the whole town's grateful to you for this," he said to Steve. "But how'd you know he killed your brother?"

Steve stood up, stalked over to the card table. Everyone's eyes were on him.

"I didn't know. I only suspected Jeff might have stopped in here seein' as how he liked to have a drink and a game of poker when he blew into town. I thought I'd stop in and find out. You see it's not hard to pick up Jeff's trail. He had a peculiar habit. Liked to whittle. Whittled wherever he went—especially his initials—whittled them into bars and—"

Steve didn't finish. Instead he went to the back of the saloon—back to his table. Very deliberately he removed the half-full whisky glass from it; placed it carefully on a near-by table. Then he sent the table crashing again—as he'd done earlier in the evening. "Jeff liked to whittle on tables too—especially while he was playing poker. He didn't like to mark up folks furniture so—he sometimes whittled them underneath. He was an expert." On the underside of the table, the initials J. D. stood out white. "J wasn't so drunk after all when I overturned that table," Steve added.

The Sheriff prodded his gun into Tanner's ribs. "It'll be a pleasure to hang you, Deuce," he said.

THE brown-haired girl pulled at Steve's sleeve. In her hand, held out for Steve to see was a tiny, whittled wooden cowboy—like the one that had fallen from Steve's pocket.

"Another funny habit of your brother's," she said. "He gave this to me when he was here. He told me he had made only one other like it, and had given it to his brother."

Steve waited for her to finish her story.

(Continued On Page 112)

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Whittling Waddy

(Continued From Page 110)

"It was a question of family ties with me also. Deuce was forcing me to work here; I was sort of hostage for a gambling debt my young brother owed him. Deuce threatened to kill him unless I stayed on here and sang and—"

"—And helped him with his dirty work?" Steve suggested coldly.

"Oh no," she said in a hurt voice, "you don't think because I—"

Steve's glance went to the half-empty whisky glass he had placed on the table adjoining the one he had overturned.

"You're wrong," she protested. "Let me explain. The night Jeff was here my brother came in threatening to shoot Deuce for the trouble he was causing him. He was drunk—foolish. Jeff stepped in and Deuce was distracted from my brother."

Steve looked deep into the girl's brown eyes. "Maybe what you say is true, and maybe you're making it up. He picked up the drugged whisky glass. "There's one way of finding out. Drink this!"

She looked puzzled for a moment. Then slowly a smile spread across her face dimpling her cheeks becomingly. She lifted the drink; swallowed it. "I don't like liquor as a rule—and I'm not one of Deuce Tanner's tools. I asked him to let me have the knockout powder because I wanted to save you from your brother's fate."

A warm smile lit up Steve's bronzed features. Then she hadn't dropped the stuff in his drink. She really had wanted to help him.

"You'd better get to a medico with that shoulder," she said interrupting his thoughts. He had almost forgotten about that shoulder—talking to her....

"Yeah. Got to get back to the spread too. It's gonna be lonesome though, without Jeff.

Her brown eyes twinkled. "I'll be home," she said.

"But I don't know where—"

"At the medico's," she answered quickly. "That's another family affair. You see, he's my uncle."

THE END

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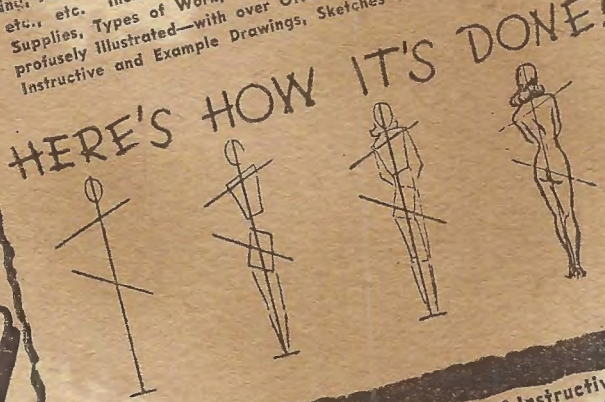

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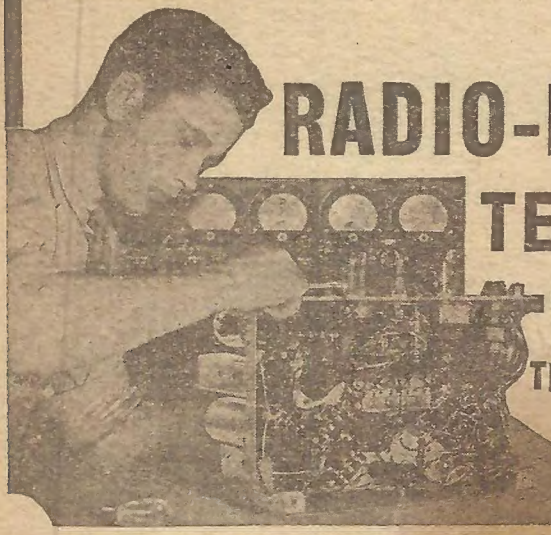

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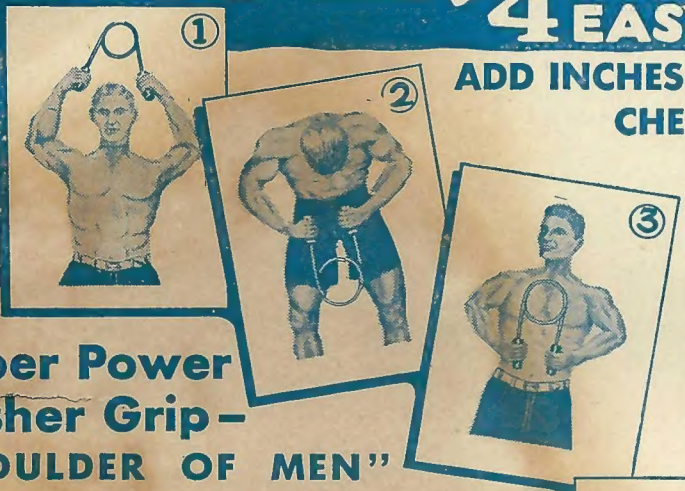

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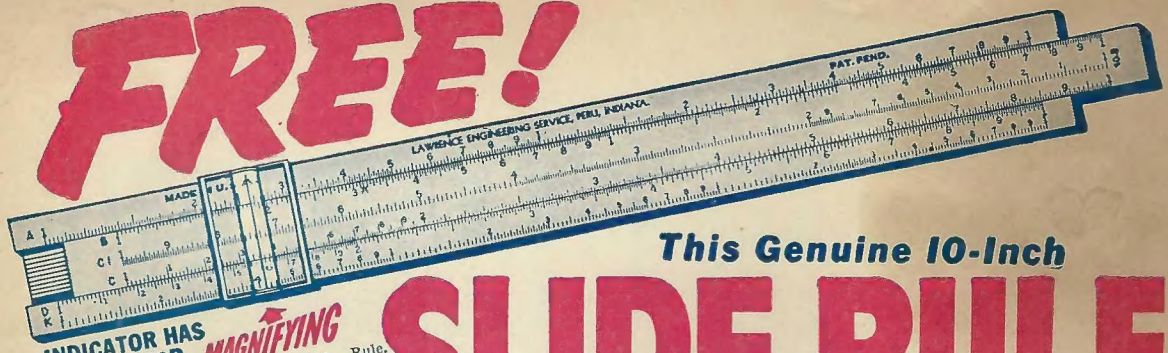

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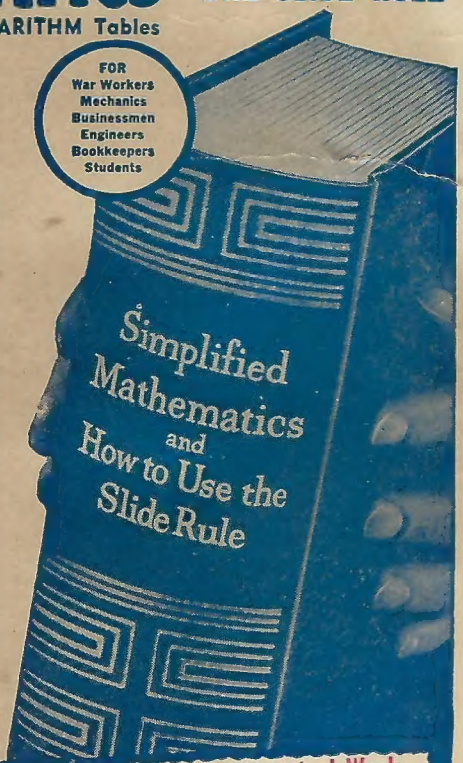

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